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South College

**Shifting Sands:  
Crises of Self-Worth in a Platformised  
Taxicab Trade**

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A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy (PhD)

Department of Sociology

Durham University

15 December 2024

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## Abstract

This thesis presents the findings of an ethnographic study that interrogated the present state of work relations in the UK's taxicab driving trade. It argues that the rapid onset of the process of *platformisation* in this trade, which one can trace back to when Silicon Valley firm Uber first arrived in London in 2012, has intensified two different-yet-interacting crises of self-worth in taxicab drivers. The first crisis found to be at play was that of *qualified* self-worth, involving, for example, the erosion of worth derived from 'professional' status in hackney carriage drivers, and the difficulties faced by private hire drivers working for Uber in turning a profit, given algorithmically-determined pay and job allocations. The second crisis was that of *relative/strategic* self-worth, whereby drivers, instead of aligning themselves with universalistic virtues, positioned themselves against other drivers based on communal group boundaries. Drawing on a hybrid theoretical toolkit composed of frameworks from pragmatic sociology and figurational sociology, the thesis retains the focus on how these disruptions to resources of worth in the wake of platformisation are encountered, evaluated, and affectively reckoned with by these social actors on an everyday basis. In doing so, it brings forth how the repercussions of platformisation are negotiated differently by those who were already in the trade and thereafter became the casualties of platformisation, as in hackney carriage drivers, versus those who joined afterwards and became directly enrolled into the economic ordering ushered in by it, as in private hire drivers working for platforms like Uber.

Keywords: taxicab driving; platformisation; Uber; self-worth; affect.

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## **Part I: Prologue**

## 1. A Volatile Terrain

This thesis examines one site, one arena, of changes in the nature of work in contemporary capitalism. The site or arena in question is the taxicab driving occupation in the UK, where the process of *platformisation* – denoting the ways in which digital platforms drive ‘several interlocking transformations of existing activities, relations and arrangements in society’ (Marres, 2022, p. 24), along with the ‘reorganisation of cultural practices and imaginaries around platforms’ (Poell et al., 2019, p. 6) – has transpired rapidly in recent years. Platformisation is just one salient crystallisation of changes in the nature of work in contemporary capitalism, which, among other shifts, have involved a broader erosion of what Boltanski and Chiapello (2005) call the *security* conferred by workers’ engagement in capitalist modes of accumulation – whether through the rise of zero-hours contracts, casualisation and diminishment of previously ‘professional’ roles, flexible work arrangements, a weakening of the ability to contest these through forms of collective action, etc. While the contents of this ethnographic study have a wider purchase for understanding such changes, its focus on platformisation is oriented towards bringing forth the specificity of the repercussions it has brought forth – repercussions that are lived through by the workers affected by it.

So what exactly are these repercussions being alluded to? The chief form taken by them that is foregrounded in this study is the unsettling and disruption of resources of *self-worth*, drawn upon by social actors in according respect, dignity and pride to both their selves and the way they lead their lives. Once again, it is useful to draw on Boltanski and Chiapello’s (2005) *The New Spirit of Capitalism* in setting the scene for this thesis. Against the backdrop of shifts in capitalist modes of organisation, like those mentioned above, resources of self-worth have been unsettled by a situation whereby social actors, and especially wage-earners, find that the ‘spirit of capitalism’ – in other words the set of normative scaffolds that grounds their practical engagement in the accumulation process – has evolved, but that their ‘values and representations,

inherited as a cultural legacy, are *still associated with earlier forms of accumulation*, as underpinned by ‘a *previous spirit* [of capitalism]’ (p. 21; emphasis added). The ‘previous spirit’ we are concerned with here is the ‘second spirit of capitalism’, which was associated with the industrial, post-war era and orientated several developments that enshrined a greater quotient of *security* for workers engaging themselves in capitalist accumulation, such as collaboration between large firms and the state and between those firms and representatives of strong unions, career management mechanisms providing pathways to long-term employment, the welfare state, among others (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005, p. 18). The decline of this spirit has transpired in a gradual manner, proceeding by way of local, small-scale *displacements* such that new modes of profit creation, associated with the genesis of a new spirit of capitalism, have been able to both entrench themselves *and* evade wide-scale recognition, and thus denunciation, of their many repercussions (pp. 34-35). Ultimately, this has given rise to the situation referred to above: one where critiques seeking greater justice in relatively nascent capitalist configurations, such as platformisation, find themselves enfeebled, befuddled, almost disabled – especially in moving beyond mere denunciations that fail to move the needle on the state of affairs. Alternatively speaking, even where such a critique is mounted, it finds that ‘the world is momentarily disrupted with respect to previous referents, and in a state that is extremely difficult to decipher...The old world it condemned has disappeared, *but people do not know what to make of the new one*’ (p. 29; emphasis added). It is the latter expression of this situation, portraying a partly elusive, routinely disenchanting stage in the recurring metamorphoses, reinventions or ‘creative destruction[s]’ (Schumpeter, 1950) of capitalism, which is particularly relevant to the context of this study.

A number of scholars have linked the aforementioned situation with crises of self-worth, whether in the form of actors continuing to invoke, often in vain, virtues that were ascendant during the reign of the second spirit (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005); an attenuation of the American dream as a cultural script (Lamont, 2019); ‘wounded attachments’ to or the ‘cruel

optimism’ of the promises held out by the ideal of a middle-class lifestyle (Brown, 1993; Berlant, 2011); and so forth. I use the plural ‘crises’ since, just as the different theorisations noted above would indicate, this was the form in which they were encountered in this study. Two different, yet interacting, crises of self-worth were identified and thereafter interrogated. The first of these was understood as a crisis of *qualified* self-worth, pertaining to and unfolding in everyday ‘tests’ or ‘trials’: situations wherein the cab driver participants of this study were faced with the demand to justify their attributions of worth, and their critiques, in terms of different frameworks of well-recognised, universalistic virtues (Boltanski and Thévenot, 2006). Since there are multiple such frameworks, and the relative command or inscription of each over the participants’ work relations has shifted in the wake of the platformisation of the trade, they often found themselves on a collision course with one another. It was within this tension between competing criteria of worth, and shifts in their efficacy in furnishing proof for the claims made in their name, that the aforementioned crisis of qualified self-worth was located in this study. Drawing upon the pragmatic sociology framework of ‘orders of worth’ (Boltanski and Thévenot, 1999; 2006), it was dissected in terms of virtues aligned with the three orders that shape economic life today: *industrial*, *market*, and *connexionist* (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005). Ethnographic data on critical operations relating to each of these orders is taken up for analysis in the first three chapters in Part V [Findings] of the thesis.

Although this crisis of qualified self-worth played a pivotal role in conflicts relating to the work relations of taxicab driving – in particular the rapid and controversial rise of Silicon Valley ride-hailing firm Uber – it was also found to interact with another crisis of self-worth, which exceeded that occupational realm. This second crisis related to strategic battles over power resources and *relative rather than qualified* status, in the sense that social position was being defined in opposition to the positions of other actors (Bourdieu, 1984). It was interrogated in terms of the Eliasian viewpoint of *figurational relations*, and is taken up for analysis in the last of the four empirical chapters [in Part V]. This perspective foregrounds the dynamics of relations

between communal groups locked in interdependence, including the mobilisation of ‘group disgrace’ against less powerful outsider/newcomer groups (Elias and Scotson, 1994, p. 104) – one potent form of which, as we will see, is racialisation. In this study, it was drawn upon in examining ethnographic data relating to struggles over power and status in members of two groups represented in the North East England taxicab trade: Newcastle-born British Asians, and White English in Durham. The key difference between the two crises alluded to thus far is whether or not participants were aligning themselves with universalistic virtues in striving towards *equivalence* – or the arrangement of beings, objects and actions such that subsequent evaluations and attributions of worth can, whilst remaining vulnerable to critique, stake a claim to a form of moral validity that transcends individual and group interests (Boltanski and Thévenot, 2006). And, as will become clear at various points in the upcoming chapters, a common thread running through them is that of *affective flows* (Fox, 2015), which permeated both crises, but did so in two different articulations – one oriented towards equivalence, the other towards strategic battles over power and status.

Let us now turn to why the cab driving occupation forms a particularly good site or arena for the sociological exploration of these crises. Besides popular imaginations, the figure of the cab driver has also captivated the interest of social scientists (e.g., Davis, 1959; Mathew, 2008; Serafin, 2019). The lifeworld of the cab driver is one in which social change – whether in the form of elusive spatiotemporal market rhythms encountered on an everyday basis<sup>1</sup>, technological developments<sup>2</sup>, demographic shifts<sup>3</sup>, or otherwise – unfolds at stellar speed. Perhaps it is not surprising, then, that it has also witnessed the evolution of capitalist modes of organisation

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<sup>1</sup> See Davis (1959) and Serafin (2019) for two contrasting understandings of this immutable feature of cab driving, and Lee Durkee’s (2019) novel for a more evocative take on it.

<sup>2</sup> The transition from horse-drawn carriages to motorised vehicles [the models of which then evolved at an increasing pace], as well as the introduction, adoption and standardisation of the taximeter, are two examples of this [discussed further in Chapter 2.1].

<sup>3</sup> It is one of those occupations which, since the end of the second world war, have formed a site for the ethnic diversification of the working class (Hobsbawm, 1994; Kalra, 2000).

(Tucker, 2018) – the most recent notable instance of which has been the process of platformisation. Recent work has identified the ‘on-location’ classification of platform work – which encompasses the taxicab trade – as marked by a higher degree and a closer form of ‘algorithmic management’ and ‘digital monitoring’ as compared to remote or ‘cloud-work’, thus making it a site of ‘strong platformisation’ (Fernández-Macías et al., 2023). This would suggest that the case of the cab driving occupation is well-suited to studying the impact of platformisation on workers, including in the form of crises of self-worth. However, there are also other, well-established reasons.

As Davis (1959) noted long ago, the occupational status of taxicab driving has always been ‘patently’ low, principally because it is not seen to involve a distinct form of ‘task-relevant competence’ – many people claim to know how to drive a car, and have some idea of routes to their destination (pp. 159-60), especially with the aid of sat-nav/online maps. Taking note of a history of precarious working conditions (Dubal, 2017), one could moreover associate it with Feuchtwang’s (1982) notion of ‘occupational ghettos’, where members of disadvantaged groups and racialised minorities tend to be concentrated. Perhaps this in turn relates to why, in the view of Goffman (1952), it was cited as one of those occupational roles where social actors, after having faced multiple failures to validate their selves in other arenas, ‘*can come to rest*’ (p. 463; emphasis added). We will see later [especially in Chapter 5.1] that all these observations need to be counterposed with the ways in which this occupation *has* provided avenues to both qualified and strategic/relative self-worth, including in the form of ‘professional’ status, to social actors – many of whom would not have found it elsewhere. Nonetheless, they do shed some light on why crises of self-worth in this particular occupation are likely to be more pronounced: they have not merely emerged in the wake of platformisation, but rather been *intensified* by it.

In thinking about how platformisation has transformed this occupation, one is vulnerable to committing an error helpfully flagged by Elias (2007) in *The Genesis of the Naval Profession*:



focusing on the salient role played by powerful actors, like Uber, which are deemed to be the ‘driving force’ behind that transformation (p. 121). While such actors may indeed have set certain irreversible shifts into motion, a sociological investigation cannot lose sight of how they come to be negotiated, contested and/or affirmed in the *practices* of social actors, and therefore are only gradually able to unsettle, disrupt and recast such practices. In the context of work relations, these practices include occupational or professional codes, whose role was underlined by Elias (2007) in his study of the conflict between ‘gentlemen’ officers and the ‘tarpaulins’ [seamen]<sup>4</sup> in the early development of the English Navy. Combined with an ethnographic methodology, the pragmatic approach taken in this study foregrounds this dimension of practices, in order to illuminate some of the myriad ways in which platformisation constitutes a certain ‘practical contradiction’ (Barthe et al., 2013) for taxicab drivers – a contradiction that intensifies a crisis of qualified self-worth. The employment of a figurational approach adds to this by accounting for how long-sedimented practices like occupational codes underpin group identities both within the occupation and in a wider, communal sense (Elias, 2007, pp. 69-70), which means that any disruption to the former also affects the latter, thereby intensifying intergroup conflicts over power and status. And thus we arrive at the situation discerned in this study: one whereby social actors – specifically taxicab drivers – found themselves in the midst of two different, yet interacting, crises of self-worth, both of which remain underway. The rationale behind the choice of the two key theoretical frameworks deployed in dissecting these crises, and the strategy of examining each crisis separately in the first instance, is outlined further across Part III [Theoretical Lens] and Part IV [Research Design] of the thesis.

With this, I invite the reader to join me in a retelling of my year-long ethnographic journey into the world[s] of contemporary, platformised taxicab driving. The upcoming series of chapters

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<sup>4</sup> The conflict centred on the resistance of gentlemen officers to the need for greater operational integration with the seaman, and was resolved by the development of career progression pathways that valued the specialised tasks and occupational codes of both, while at the same time achieving a degree of integration (Elias, 2007).

[Part II: Background] continues to set the scene by providing a brief overview of taxicab regulation in Britain, and the controversy of platformisation and Uber's rise. This is followed by a discussion of the theoretical and methodological approaches [Part III and IV], four empirical chapters based on ethnographic findings [Part V], and lastly a short conclusion [Part VI].

## **Part II: Background**

## 2.1. Enter the Hackneys: Historical Origins of Taxicab Regulation in Britain

“I cannot omit to mention any new Thing that comes up amongst us, tho’ never so trivial: Here is one Captain Baily, he hath been a Sea Captain, but now lives on the Land, about this City, where he tries Experiments. He hath erected according to his Ability some four Hackney Coaches, put his Men in a Livery, and appointed them to stand at the May-Pole in the Strand, giving them Instructions at what Rates to carry Men into several Parts of the Town.”

– Thomas, 1<sup>st</sup> Earl of Strafford, in 1634 (Wentworth and Radcliffe, 1739)

Up until the late 16<sup>th</sup> century, most city dwellers in Great Britain relied on boats and ferries to travel to their destinations. In the capital London, the River Thames, its estuaries, and adjoining canals bustled with small vessels operated by ‘lightermen’ and ‘watermen’; the former were responsible for transporting goods, while the latter transported people. Providers of passenger transport were represented by the Company of Watermen, an organisation that had gained much goodwill with the Royal Family and Parliament owing to its functional presence on the Thames, which had hitherto served as the principal thoroughfare of London (Pratt, 1912, pp. 58–64). At the dawn of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, however, an alternative mode of transport – the horse-drawn carriage – started becoming prominent on the streets, threatening to dislodge the business model employed by the watermen<sup>5</sup>. First appearing towards the end of Elizabeth I’s reign, these carriages were initially predominantly owned by the nobility, but as time passed more and more coachmen started offering their services to the general public for a fare.

Sometime between the years 1625 and 1636, a former navy officer called Captain John Baily set up what is considered to be the first stand for horse-drawn carriages – equivalent to a taxi rank today – in London. Located in the Strand, it is uncertain when exactly it first appeared

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<sup>5</sup> According to historical work on hackney carriages in the early 17<sup>th</sup> century, coachmen in that period tended to charge ‘a shilling for every five miles’, which was cheaper than the fares of watermen. While undercutting the watermen’s fares helped the coachmen expand their trade, the complete absence of regulation soon led to accusations of exorbitant fares being charged (Pratt, 1912, p. 39).

on the famous street, however an examination of primary sources from the first half of the 17<sup>th</sup> century – including the diaries of the 1<sup>st</sup> Earl of Strafford, quoted above – suggests that it was in place by the year 1634 (Fady, 2021). This stand provided the public with a dedicated place for hiring four-wheel coaches, which had begun plying for hire on the streets of the capital and were colloquially known as ‘hackney carriages’<sup>6</sup>. As time passed, the general lack of regulation around the commercial use of these coaches led to a multitude of problems, foremost among which were coachmen charging exorbitant fares, detrimental impacts on the esteemed business of watermen, congestion on and damage to the passageways of London, noise pollution that disturbed those living adjacent, and horse manure. In particular, the manner in which then-unregulated hackney carriages initiated the [gradual] downfall of the established business of the watermen (see Pratt, 1912, pp. 58–64; Jolis, 2013; Elliot, 2016) mirrors somewhat the present-day conflict between the hackney carriage trade and Uber that forms an important subject matter of this thesis, even if – as I will detail later – the extent of codification that has accrued to the hackney trade over more than three centuries means that the stakes are far higher this time around.

The first attempt at addressing the aforementioned issues, prompted in part by sustained lobbying on part of the watermen<sup>7</sup>, met a curious fate: a royal proclamation by King Charles I which ‘forbade that any hired coach be used or suffered in London’<sup>8</sup> except for journeys beyond 3

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<sup>6</sup> The etymology of ‘hackney carriage’ has its roots in the Norman French word *hacquenee*, referring to a horse that could be hired. Similarly, the word ‘cab’ – later used for lighter, two-wheeled carriages with space for two passengers that were brought over from Paris and took over the trade in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century – derives from *cabriole* in French, which denotes the manner in which a goat leaps forward, a movement thought to be synonymous with that of the lightweight, two-wheeled carriage.

<sup>7</sup> An example of this continual lobbying effort by the Company of Waterman is a petition they sent to the House of Commons in 1656, part of which reads: ‘That of late your petitioners’ art is rendered more contemptible than formerly, and their employment much lessened and impoverished, by reason of the strange increase of hackney coaches, which have multiplied from about three hundred to a thousand, in eleven years last past, whereby people are discouraged from binding their sons apprentice to the trade of a waterman, and if remedy be not speedily had, there will not be a sufficient number of watermen to supply the service of the Commonwealth at sea, and also your petitioners and families utterly ruined’ (Pratt, 1912, p. 62).

<sup>8</sup> ‘A Proclamation for the Restraint of Excessive Carriages to the Destruction of the High Wayes’ (1<sup>st</sup> November 1635), in *Proclamations, II Chronological Series, Charles I [1625-1649]* (cited in Noble, 2013; see also Pratt, 1912, p. 61; Elliot, 2016, pp. 730–31).

miles proved so ineffectual that a subsequent proclamation had to be issued two years later, which allowed the public to hire such coaches but capped their number at 50 (Pratt, 1912, p. 61). Several increases to the cap followed over the next few decades (*The Gentlemen's Magazine*, 1857, p. 663; Pratt, 1912). In 1694, an Act of Parliament was passed which set the number of coaches at 700, and instituted a Board of Commissioners to oversee the implementation of a rudimentary framework for the separate, parallel licensing of coachmen and coaches as well as the determination of fares. This Act formally brought hackney coachmen under the remit of the law, just like the watermen before them, and introduced an architecture of regulation whose pillars [licensing of drivers; vehicles; and the setting of fares] can still be observed in the taxicab trade today (*An Act for the lycenseing and regulateing Hackney-Coaches and Stage-Coaches 1694*). Besides the issues alluded to above, the broader impetus for the passage of this Act was to protect the travelling public; it therefore marks the beginning of a long regulatory process that cemented the status of hackney carriages as being 'publicly hired' – a frame of reference still held by those working in the trade today.

Subsequent amendments to the 1694 Act culminated in the more systematic codification of the hackney carriage trade under the *London Hackney Carriage Act 1831*<sup>9</sup>, and for the rest of the UK, the largely derivative sections 37 to 79 [collectively titled 'Hackney carriages'] of the *Town Police Clauses Act 1847*. Both these Acts, in their partly amended form, remain applicable today. There are two key aspects of this legislation that are important for contextualising the forthcoming content of this section [Part II]. The first pertains to the right to 'ply for hire'<sup>10</sup> on the streets, conferred upon hackney carriages in return for complying with a regime for licensing of drivers and vehicles. The second is the designation of local councils [unitary, district or borough] as

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<sup>9</sup> This Act abolished the cap on the number of hackney carriages and [separately] coachmen that may be licensed in the capital.

<sup>10</sup> Conferment of this right put hackney coachmen on par with the watermen, as is indicated for instance by section 56 of the *London Hackney Carriage Act 1831*, which specified a penalty for misbehaviour on part of 'proprietors, drivers or watermen'.

licensing authorities who may – according to the original form of this Act – license as many hackney coaches and drivers ‘as they see fit’, devise their own ‘byelaws’<sup>11</sup> to further codify facets of the trade addressed by the statute, such as the fixing of fares<sup>12</sup>, as well as levy penalties for certain offences pertaining to functional specifications of coaches as well as the conduct of coachmen, for instance a coach not displaying the license plate; plying for hire without a license; overcharging; refusing a fare; and misbehaviour with the public. In effect, the Act empowered council officials to impose quantity [supply side] controls on the trade, ban price competition, as well as introduce the first iteration of qualitative controls on licensed coaches and coachmen, which at first took the form of sanctions for specific criminal offenses (Noble, 2013, p. 17). Designed originally for the regulation of four-wheel hackney carriages and two-wheel cabriolets and the coachmen who drove them, the provisions of the 1847 Act later became applicable to motorised taxis, which progressively took over the trade in the first two decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Besides the 1847 Act, there are two more key instruments that underpin the current regulatory framework for taxicabs in England and Wales: the *Local Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 1976*, and the *Transport Act 1985*. It is the 1976 Act that effectively created the present-day ‘two-tier’ system whereby hackney carriages [or licensed taxis/black cabs] are distinguished from private hire vehicles [or ‘minicabs’ as they are called in London; henceforth referred to as PHVs], with the latter category referring to any vehicle providing transport services

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<sup>11</sup> In the present byelaws primarily pertain to the manner in which the hackney carriage is furnished [i.e., vehicle specifications like the license plate, hire sign, taximeter, etc.] as well as the conduct of licensed taxi drivers; for example, Newcastle City Council mandates that the ‘driver of a hackney carriage shall at all times, when standing, plying for hire and when hired, be of a clean and respectable dress and appearance and conduct himself in an orderly manner, and with civility and propriety towards every person seeking to hire, or hiring or being conveyed in such carriage...’ (Newcastle City Council, 2023).

<sup>12</sup> See for instance Schedule (B.) and Schedule (C.) of the *London Hackney Carriage Act 1831*, which set out for the first time fixed rates for hiring hackney carriages both by distance [miles] and by time travelled. Schedule (C.) for instance set the rate of One Shilling for the first mile, and ‘for any Distance exceeding One Mile, after the Rate of Sixpence for every Half Mile, and for any fractional Part of Half a Mile over and above any Number of Half Miles completed’.

based solely on pre-bookings accepted by a ‘private hire operator’<sup>13</sup>. This Act was in part prompted by concerns raised regarding the unregulated nature of such work, which had been expanding alongside the steady rise in private ownership of motor vehicles as well as widespread access to home telephones in the post-war era (Jolis, 2013), and was of great detriment to the economic interests of the now well-established hackney carriage trade (Noble, 2013, pp. 46–47). The introduction by the Act of the separate, parallel licensing of private hire drivers, vehicles, and operators was somewhat synonymous with the manner in which hackney carriages were first brought under the remit of the law in 1694. However, there was one key distinction, and that had to do with the characterisation of the new sector as providing a ‘private’ rather than ‘public’ form of transport. As is usefully summarised by Andrew Noble in his doctoral thesis on the effectiveness of local government regulation of the hackney carriage sector, this distinction led to a difference in the *degree* of regulation made applicable to the PHV sector:

“Although most members of the public do not distinguish between hackney carriages and private hire vehicles, *technically private hire vehicles are not taxis and do not form part of the public transport system*. Hackney carriages are regulated in all aspects of their operation, including entry into the market, qualitative regulation of both vehicles and drivers, and fares. Private hire vehicles are subject to qualitative regulation of the vehicles, drivers and operators only<sup>14</sup>.”

– Noble (2013, p. 6; emphasis added)

Earlier on in this section, I alluded to how the broader impetus of the 1694 Act, which first established a licensing system for hackney carriages, had been to protect the travelling public. Subsequent regulation, including the 1847 Act, continued to approach the regulation of the sector as one of ‘publicly hired’ transport, which was how they were widely viewed since at least the early

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<sup>13</sup> See sections 55 and 80 of the *Local Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 1976*. PHV regulation in London was codified through the *Private Hire Vehicles (London) Act 1998*.

<sup>14</sup> This marks a key difference between PHVs in Britain and private vehicles associated with ‘rideshare’ services in the United States and other countries like Australia, which are not subject to a framework akin to the one established by the 1976 Act. Caution is therefore advised when making cross-national comparisons pertaining to the operations of Uber in the respective markets.



17<sup>th</sup> century (Pratt, 1912, p. 58). Whether or not this characterisation is formally enshrined in law is up for debate<sup>15</sup>, but when we consider the historical evolution of the regulation of hackney carriages – including for instance the exclusive right to ‘ply for hire’, the setting of fares in order to ban price competition, and the attachment of more stringent qualitative requirements for licensing in comparison to PHVs since the 1976 Act – it is clear that the imperatives behind their regulation have remained closely connected to such a characterisation. A brief specification of the aforementioned qualitative requirements is in order.

Whilst the 1847 Act had introduced an aspect of qualitative controls on the taxicab trade, this only went as far as the threat of prosecution for specific offenses, and any possibilities beyond these offenses remained uncoded. Over a century later, 1976 Act codified *five* key qualitative controls, all of which are now universally implemented by councils across the UK: that the applicant is deemed a ‘fit and proper person’ to drive; that they have held their ordinary driving license for at least twelve months at the time of the application; and checks on their criminal record, medical fitness, and immigration status<sup>16</sup>. Considerable variance exists in the interpretation and application of some of these controls, and it is their *local* elaboration that chiefly forms the basis of the exercise of council officials’ discretion in taxicab licensing. For example, an applicant deemed ‘fit and proper’ by one licensing authority may find that their application would be refused under the understanding of ‘fit and proper’ deployed by officials in a neighbouring county<sup>17</sup>. Such discretion extends farther in the case of hackney carriages than

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<sup>15</sup> While the *Transport Act 1985* [s 10(1)(a)] specifies that taxis and private hire vehicles do not fall in the category of ‘public service vehicles’ specified in the *Public Passenger Vehicles Act 1981*, Noble (2013, p. 2) argues that they do in fact meet the definition of ‘public passenger transport services’ set out in s 63(10(a) of the 1985 Act, which defines them as ‘all those services on which members of the public rely on getting from place to place, when not relying on private facilities of their own’.

<sup>16</sup> See Part II [‘Hackney carriages and private hire vehicles’] of the *Local Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 1976*.

<sup>17</sup> Some councils separate the ‘fit and proper’ requirement from an applicant’s criminal history and medical fitness, while others subsume the latter into the former. The lack of a precise definition has translated into a considerable variety of approaches, whereby in some areas court judgements like *McCool v Rushcliffe Borough Council [1998]* are drawn upon, while in others the officials formulate their own tests, e.g., the ‘relative’ or ‘loved one’ test (Noble, 2013, p. 151).

PHVs, underpinned by both their characterisation as being ‘publicly hired’ as well as slight differences in the wording of the respective provisions<sup>18</sup>. Similarly, while the Act stipulates that for a license to be granted an applicant must have been authorised to drive for ‘at least twelve months’, a number of councils have exercised residual discretion and set their own minimum driving experience qualifications in excess of the statutory requirement<sup>19</sup>.

Further to these five controls, a number of councils also administer ‘knowledge’ and ‘locality’ tests for assessing topographical skills; advanced driving tests; and/or, as in the recent past, require drivers to complete certain safeguarding, safety, and disability awareness courses before they are licensed. Perhaps the most famous example of the requirement to pass a topographical test is the ‘Knowledge of London’, which will be discussed later in the thesis. Such a requirement has, as in the case of London, been more stringent for the hackney carriage sector as compared to private hire, and we will see in a later empirical chapter how, in the wake of platformisation and Uber’s rise, a further weakening of the efficacy of this instrument in regulating market entry to the PHV sector has become a burning point of contention for those in the hackney trade.

The final statute that merits consideration in charting the course of taxicab regulation in Britain<sup>20</sup> is the *Transport Act 1985*, which amended the 1847 and 1976 Acts and significantly extended their implementation across England and Wales. While the 1847 Act had granted a range of regulatory powers to local authorities, it by no means required their application; in other words, taxicabs could in effect remain entirely unregulated [i.e., no requirement for licensing] unless the

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<sup>18</sup> Section 59 of the *Local Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 1976* directs council licensing officers to not grant a hackney carriage license ‘unless they are satisfied’ that the preconditions of fitness and propriety, immigration status, and minimum driving experience of 12 months have been met. Section 51(a) of the same Act, applicable to PHV drivers, is more permissive in its wording: a license must be granted if the same preconditions are met.

<sup>19</sup> For example, Bath requires applicants for a hackney carriage license to ‘have held a full driving license for a minimum of three years’ (Bath and North East Somerset Council, 2023).

<sup>20</sup> Regulation of taxicabs in Scotland, while underpinned by different legislation [the *Civic Government (Scotland) Act 1982*], is largely derivative of the ‘two-tier’ system in England and Wales.

provisions of the legislations were formally ‘adopted’ by the local council (Noble, 2013, p. 11). In fact, up until 1985, this was the case in as many as 60 councils across England and Wales. It was only with the passage of the *Transport Act 1985*, specifically section 15 [titled ‘Extension of taxi licensing in England and Wales’], that local authorities were obliged to administer a licensing system for taxicabs in their respective areas. Therefore, it was as a consequence of this Act that the ‘two-tier’ system of licensing devised by the prior two Acts began to take effect across England and Wales.

There was also a second key change effected by the 1985 Act: the weakening of quantity controls on hackney carriage licenses. By amending section 37 of the 1847 Act, it effectively removed wide discretionary powers vested in local councillors to license ‘such numbers of hackney coaches or carriages...as they see fit’. Instead of exercising such unqualified discretion, councillors could now only refuse a license if they could demonstrate, by way of a periodic survey, that there was no significant unmet demand for hackney carriages in their area. As for PHVs, the question of quantity controls had been left entirely open in the 1976 Act, and this meant that councillors had no authority to limit the number of licenses anyways. It may appear that this change marks the first step towards the ‘deregulation’ of the taxicab trade, or in other terms, its subsumption into a *market* logic. However this is not entirely the case, as local councils have continued imposing quantity controls based on periodic survey-based reviews; an example of this is Preston City Council, which states on its website:

“Preston City Council does limit the number of hackney carriages to 187. The need for this limit is reviewed periodically (approximately every three years) by a competent company appointed to conduct the review on behalf of the Authority. The Authority has no power to limit the number of private hire vehicles.”

– Preston City Council (2023)

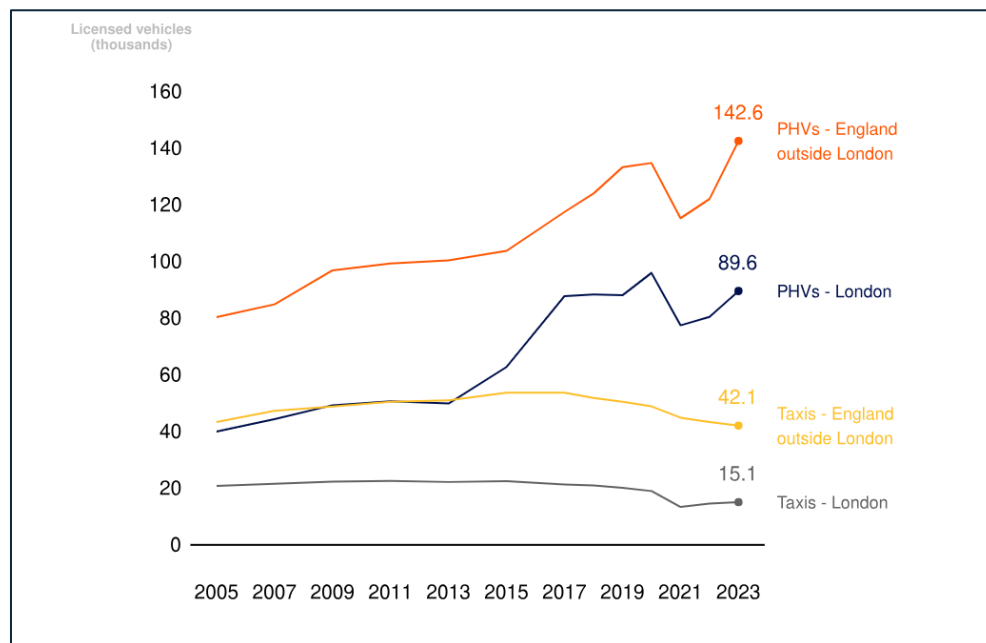
As of 2023, as many as 72 [or 25% of all] licensing authorities impose quantity controls, while the remainder do not take such an approach (Department for Transport, 2023). Nevertheless, provisions relating to qualitative controls [under the 1976 Act] and the promulgation of byelaws [under the 1847 Act] still apply to both the hackney carriage and private hire sectors, and the 1985 Act has precipitated a shift whereby these have become the main avenue by which local councillors' authority is exercised, and limitations upon market entry achieved, especially for the hackney carriage sector.

To conclude, this chapter has provided a historical account of how taxicab regulation in Britain evolved over a period of more than three centuries, gradually assuming the form it takes today. This account provides important background for contextualising the forthcoming chapters, which present an analysis of ethnographic research findings on the controversy surrounding platformisation and the rise of Uber – a company whose entry into the private hire sector in 2012 brought widespread disruption to the way in which the 'two-tier' regulatory framework had operated up until that point. In the next chapter, I discuss certain key aspects of this controversy as encountered in my research, focusing in particular on issues relating to inconsistencies between the pre-existing landscape of taxicab regulation, outlined above, and the manner in which the then-novel service chose to conduct its business.

## 2.2. Shake It Up: Platformisation and the Controversial Rise of Uber

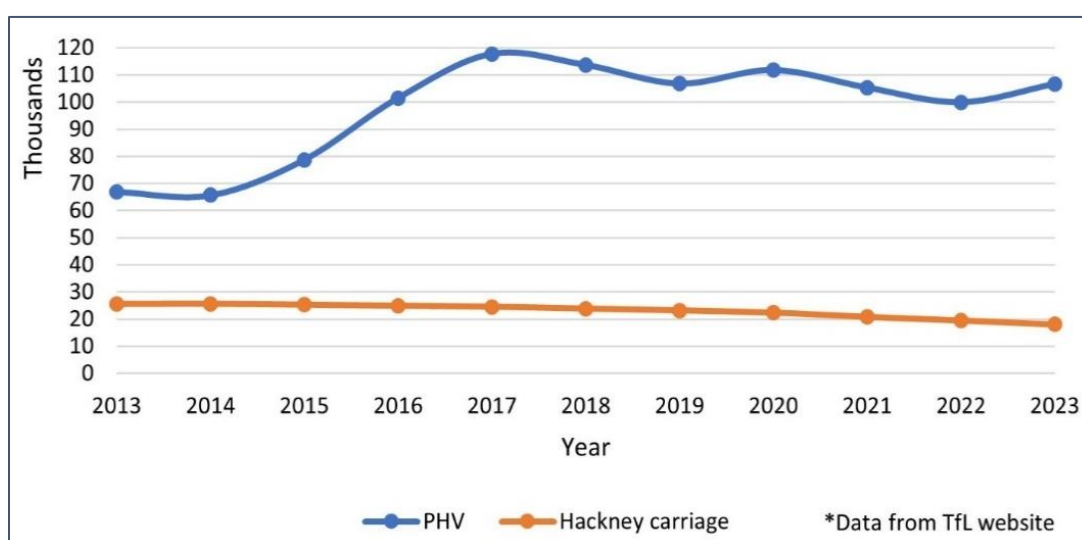
Whereas in the previous chapter I traced the evolution of taxicab regulation from the past to the present, in this chapter I proceed the other way around – by first examining the controversy of platformisation and Uber’s rise as it exists today. As indicated previously, ‘platformisation’ in this study is understood as both a broader social process (Poell et al., 2019; Marres, 2022) as well as a controversy involving particular ‘matters of concern’ (Latour, 2005). I begin the chapter by delineating certain key aspects of this controversy as encountered in my research, which took place between August 2022 and July 2023, and then go backwards in time, connecting my observations to some salient events that have transpired since Uber was first licensed as a private hire operator in London in 2012.

Of all observations relating to this controversy, perhaps the single most salient one was the drastic rise in PHVs following the entry of Uber into the market. Figure 1 below provides an indication of the scale of this rise:



**Figure 1:** Trend of taxi [hackney carriage] and PHV licenses in England, 2005-2023 (Department for Transport, 2023)

As can be observed in the figure above, around two years or so after Uber first launched in the UK in 2012, the trend of PHV licensing accelerated significantly across London and the rest of England, while the trend of hackney carriage licensing remained stable at a lower rate of growth up until 2016-17, after which it saw a decline – one that continues to unfold outside of London today. An expected corollary of this rise in PHVs has been the rise in the number of licenses granted to PHV drivers, which can be gleaned from the following graph plotting license numbers in London over the past decade:



**Figure 2:** Trend of hackney carriage and PHV driver licenses in London, 2013-2023 (Transport for London, 2023)

One might wonder why this acceleration of PHV licensing is of any concern, or how is it any different to past moments that shifted the overall competitive makeup of the taxicab trade, for instance the expansion of the London-based PHV operator Addison Lee in the decade following the passage of the *Private Hire Vehicles (London) Act 1998*. Part of the answer has undoubtedly to do with the unprecedented scale of the rise in numbers seen over the past decade, and the extent to which this rise is linked directly to Uber; for example, as of 2019, as many as 45,000 of a total of 108,000 PHV drivers in London were regularly working on the Uber app (Uber, 2019a). But

whether in or beyond London, the regulatory framework for the PHV sector never allowed for quantitative controls on licensing, whereas qualitative controls were designed to be less stringent than those applicable to hackney carriages, so a sheer rise in numbers cannot be objected to without reference to other factors.

Indeed, the primary reasons behind why this rise in PHV licensing has stirred up one of the most enduring controversies ever seen in the taxicab industry pertain to the myriad ways in which it has accentuated tensions between Uber's model of doing business and the pre-existing regulatory space it had to operate in, and in particular the unsettling impact this model has had on the manner in which qualitative controls on the PHV sector had functioned, and been enforced, up until fifteen years or so ago. It is worth noting that the form these tensions have assumed has evolved over the years, so the issues that were found to be at stake in this research project may not resemble those that were salient five or ten years ago; in this regard it may be said that the rise of Uber constitutes a *meta-controversy*, such that the multiple, partly interrelated issues that compose it may attain salience at different points in time, thereby forming controversies in themselves.

For example, on two separate occasions in 2017 and 2019, London's licensing authority Transport for London [TfL] temporarily revoked Uber's PHV operator license. On both occasions, it was the evasion of certain qualitative controls that was at stake: lack of robust procedures to vet criminal record [enhanced DBS] checks and medical certificates of Uber drivers in 2017, and unlicensed, uninsured drivers uploading their photos on licensed drivers' accounts to work on the app in 2019 (Transport for London, 2017; 2019). In the context of this project, while these revocations were cited by some participants as an example of Uber's tendencies to either evade or overtly break the law, or in underlining the general incongruity of its business model with the landscape of taxicab regulation in the UK, changes made by the company after the fact have ensured compliance, and so the specific issues raised by TfL back then no longer had the same

potency at the time of this project. Below, I briefly describe two separate issues which have smouldered over a longer duration, in turn becoming focal points where the controversy plays out today: the question of ‘e-hailing’; and cross-border hire. The latter of these issues was found to be particularly important; it will therefore be referred back to and unpacked further in the analysis of ethnographic data later in this thesis.

### ***When Technology Muddies the Waters: Is it Pre-booking or ‘E-hailing’?***

In 2012, when Uber first obtained its license, it emplaced itself into the pre-existing private hire regulatory category in the UK. However shortly afterwards it became clear that it differed significantly from virtually all other operators in this market, whose operations were based on advance bookings taken over the phone [including by text message] or directly from customers who called at local offices. Perhaps one innovation to this process was people being able to approach representatives at popular nightlife venues, who would then summon a cab for them, as in the case of Addison Lee (Jolis, 2013). But for Uber, which is modelled on the ‘platform’ model underpinned by online mediation (Srnicsek, 2016) and has described itself throughout the world as a ‘ride-hailing service’, neither a phone call nor a physical premises nor any representative was needed. The two main prerequisites for its business model to work were already in place: widespread smartphone adoption, and connectivity to the internet. Booking requests, matching each of those requests to a cab in the vicinity, and then tracking the journey in real time are all functions that take place online, by means of algorithms encoded into the Uber app. This significantly reduces the time it takes for a customer to arrange a PHV; indeed, as any user of the Uber app would know, on most occasions it takes under a minute to match with an Uber driver, and only a few minutes for that driver to arrive afterwards. When Uber first obtained its license in 2012, the possibility of such lead times came as an unprecedented development in the private hire sector. And sure enough, it was to spell trouble for *both sides* of the taxicab trade – something that is well encapsulated in the following introductory account from one participant below:



“We’ve had recessions before in London, like when we had the Iraq war and the Americans were too scared to travel [to London/Europe]. We lost a lot of business that summer. Every time you get one [a recession], you try and hold your nerve, your earnings go down by around fifty percent. But the biggest one we’ve had, the one we’ve never recovered from, is [the arrival of] Uber. The way they model themselves is *completely alien* to how any taxi company works....[ ]...it affected not just taxis, but also minicabs – they were disrupting both sides of the industry.”

– Alec, head of a London black cab drivers’ association, phone interview, 11.02.2023

With over three decades of experience as a black cab driver in London, Alec had witnessed, and worked through, numerous economic downturns in the trade. Yet, and as the exhibit above indicates, none of them even remotely approached the disruption wrought by Uber’s arrival, so much so that he seemingly inadvertently described it to me as a ‘recession’ in itself. He noted how Uber’s ‘completely alien’ business model didn’t just affect black cabs/hackney carriages, but also the existing PHV [‘minicab’] trade. This part of his statement is particularly interesting as certain key actors in London’s PHV sector, like the operator Addison Lee, have for long been considered fierce competitors of the black cab trade. Yet after Uber’s arrival, Alec seems to be looking out for their interest, too.

This drawing of a distinction between Uber and other PHV firms isn’t surprising, however, as the former’s business model came to have a much more pronounced impact upon the hackneys’ exclusive, legally codified right to pick up customers hailing them on the streets [known as ‘plying for hire’]. Following the company’s arrival, trade organisations in the hackney carriage sector soon crystallised their critique, and began airing their displeasure at what they called ‘e-hailing’: plying for hire, *but on the internet*. It is peculiar to note that this term was not, in fact, conceived by these hackney organisations, but was rather taken off of Uber’s own website, where it was a tag attached to blog posts about its operations in the United States and elsewhere (e.g., Uber, 2018a). An example of how their critiques are framed can be seen in a tweet posted by another black cab drivers’ representative, given below:

You can now ehail a minicab. We was told that you won't be able to hail minicabs, but now they are telling us that minicabs are not working in our market the immediate hailed market, actually we're working in theirs the prebooked market.

**Figure 3:** Twitter post from head of a London black cab drivers' association (X, 2023a)

This critical framing of Uber's almost instantaneous booking process, now also extending to smartphone apps made accessible to hackney carriage drivers [e.g., FreeNow, Cabify, Bolt], has thus far not been upheld in court<sup>21</sup>, but is key to understanding the manner in which battle lines are drawn by actors affiliated with the hackney carriage sector in the controversy of Uber's rise.

### ***Abolish Distance: Cross-border Hire***

Another key point of contention regarding Uber's operations was the blurring of spatial boundaries between local councils when it came to working as a cab driver, which had been in place ever since the 1847 Act delegated taxi licensing to local councils. In the PHV sector, such boundaries had been reinforced by the need for operators to have some kind of physical premises for managing pre-bookings and dispatching cabs. As indicated above, Uber's business model does not have such a constraint, and as the company has grown into one of the largest PHV operators in the UK, there has been a profound shift in the PHV trade as it had existed in years past. For one, this shift has been marked by a movement towards concentration and monopolisation that has edged out smaller operators, as is suggested by the following introductory extract from a conversation with a veteran hackney carriage driver in Newcastle:

"When I started [in 1988], there were 191 hackney carriage vehicles in the city of Newcastle upon Tyne, now there are 785; there were 300 PHV vehicles, now there are more than 3500. There used to be small PHV offices in the East End of Newcastle, some of which remained in the business until

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<sup>21</sup> The court case most relevant here is 'Reading Borough Council v Ali' (2019), in which charges levelled against a London-licensed Uber driver that he had been 'plying for hire' in Reading just by being active on the Uber app were dismissed, thus undermining the stance taken by hackney carriage associations.

the early 2010s. Now we have only 2 major local companies: Nearby and Blueline. And on the other end there's Uber and Bolt.”

– Osman, Newcastle hackney carriage driver, in-person interview, 18.06.2023

The closure of small PHV offices, like the ones Osman mentioned in the statement above, marked the demise of an archetypal model of business organisation that had come to define the sector in the decades following the passage of the *Local Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 1976*. Running operations out of offices located in the local area ensured that each operator's cab fleet would by and large be working within their own licensing authority. In cases where a pre-booked fare needed to be taken across county lines, for instance airport runs, the norm was for the driver to complete the drop-off and make their way back to their own area: either for another pick-up, or to wait at the office until they were dispatched again. So widespread was this practice that it has its own colloquial term in the taxicab trade – ‘return to base’ – even though in the wake of Uber's rise it has been rendered largely irrelevant. Moves by other PHV firms to hurriedly adapt to Uber's presence in the market have focused on making technology [e.g., their own apps] integral to their operations, thus weakening the need for this practice.

While Uber is technically licensed as an operator in each local council it operates in, and even has an office presence in a small number of these [including Newcastle-upon-Tyne], practically speaking it is not based out of any one location in particular; as noted earlier, bookings, dispatch and tracking are all coordinated online. As the number of people using the Uber app in the UK grew steadily after 2012, it became increasingly clear that Uber drivers licensed in one area could use the app to pick-up passengers in another area, or indeed, just work there entirely. Given the significant differences between licensing authorities when it comes to qualitative regulations made applicable to PHVs and drivers, for example the requirement to undertake knowledge and/or locality tests, as well as the cost outlays tied to these, this practice has led to a wave of condemnation from a number of actors in the overall taxicab trade.

So persistent has been this condemnation that in 2018 Uber attempted to address it by rolling out a ‘geo-fencing’ feature on its app, which limits Uber drivers to picking-up passengers in one of nine ‘regions’ based on where they are originally licensed (Uber, 2018b). These regions still encompass multiple licensing authorities, thus allowing the practice of cross-border hire to continue. Combined with the continued rapid pace of PHV licensing across the country, the extent to which geo-fencing moderates its scale is difficult to ascertain. As for the critiques levied at this practice, they were varied and multifaceted, and formed an intriguing case of how something that had been established in the courts to *not* contravene the current regulatory framework<sup>22</sup> was nonetheless perceived as being against the spirit of that framework, for it instigated a severe upheaval of the manner in which that framework had functioned over a number of decades. I shall examine critiques of cross-border hire more closely as part of my theoretically driven analysis of ethnographic findings later in the thesis. For now, it suffices to say that cross-border hire has, in a matter of a few years, become an intense flashpoint in the controversy surrounding platformisation and Uber’s rise.

The preceding two chapters, first on the history of taxicab regulation and then on the controversy of Uber’s rise, have laid the groundwork and ‘set the scene’ for the remainder of this thesis. In the next section [Part III], I lay out the theoretical approach that underpins my analysis of ethnographic findings – a hybrid approach that mobilises two key frameworks, one of which, I

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<sup>22</sup> There are two key court cases on this matter: *Dittah v Birmingham City Council [1993]* (cited in Law Commission, 2014), which is interpreted as allowing a PHV to operate beyond the locality which licensed it [colloquial term ‘right to roam’] *as long as* the driver, vehicle, and operator are licensed by the same authority [the ‘triple lock’]; and ‘Delta Merseyside Ltd and Uber Britannia Ltd v Knowsley Metropolitan Borough Council’ (2018), which reinforced the former judgement when it nullified a council policy requiring PHV drivers to declare that they will predominantly work in the same locality as where they are licensed. However, why the matter is seen as being far from settled may be owed to other court judgements pertaining to the PHV sector, which have stated clearly that ‘the hallmark of the licensing regulatory regime is localism’ (*Blue Line Taxis Ltd v Newcastle-upon-Tyne City Council*, 2012) and ‘that the authorities responsible for granting licenses should have the authority to exercise full control’ over ‘all vehicles and drivers being operated...within its area’ (*Shanks v North Tyneside Borough Council*, 2001).

argue, is particularly suited to the study of the *everyday reproduction* of controversies, like the potent one reviewed in this chapter.

## **Part III: Theoretical Lens**

### 3.1. Overview

The theoretical toolkit employed in this thesis may, first of all, be described as one marked by opposing tendencies. Drawing on concepts from disparate bodies of work with sometimes irreconcilable onto-epistemological assumptions, it has been put together with the understanding that different theoretical frameworks are best suited to shining a light on different aspects of social problems, and that, therefore, any given framework will necessarily be partial in what it brings to light. One may expound upon this in terms of John Law's (2004) notion of 'method assemblage'. In brief, this notion seeks to bring to the fore the *performativity* of research methods, and of their findings, across three proposed forms of locality: *presence*, as in what constitutes the 'in-here' representations of science that refer to a given object of knowledge 'out-there'; *manifest absence*, as in the 'out-there' reality the preceding representations are supposed to correspond to; and *absence as otherness*, as in all forms of ambiguity that are deliberately lost in translation yet necessary to the singular correspondence arrived at (p. 42). It may likewise be applied to the deployment of particular *conceptual-methodological* approaches within the social sciences, each of which would then involve its own *absence as otherness*<sup>23</sup>.

A typical course of action in sociological inquiry has been for the conceptual-methodological approach to draw upon different theoretical frameworks that *reinforce* one another, enabling it to dissect more aspects of the problem at hand than it would have otherwise. This is a strategy I have myself pursued in the past, by weaving together elements of the adjacent traditions of assemblage thinking, Actor-Network Theory [ANT] and new materialism, as well as by identifying continuities between and then co-operationalising the relatively distant traditions of assemblage thinking and autoethnography (Khan, 2022). In this study, however, I encountered

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<sup>23</sup> On a similar note, one could refer to Michelle Murphy's proposition that each 'epistemic assemblage' – understood here as again referring to a conceptual-methodological approach – has its own 'regime of perceptibility/imperceptibility', leading it to 'populate our world with some objects *and not others*', coupled with 'certain actions to be performed on those objects' (Murphy, 2006, p. 24; emphasis added).

two distinct arenas of social relations – or as I call them shortly, two ‘planes’ of relationality – in what I observed during my fieldwork. Albeit they did interact with each other, it was clear that they also had their own, distinct logics, such that they constituted ‘problem-areas’ in their own right. This warranted the devising of a conceptual-methodological approach that diverged from the earlier, tried-and-tested strategy. Unable to find a theoretical framework that could, in my view, holistically interrogate the important questions raised by the dynamics of *both* these planes, I came to believe that any time-limited attempt at ‘combining’ frameworks which addressed either one of them, or making such frameworks directly reinforce each other, would lead to reducing one to the other, and consequently the particularities of each plane being lost.

Taking the aforementioned realisation as a starting point, the theoretical lens employed in this thesis mobilises two key resources, belonging to two heretofore disparate traditions within sociology: the pragmatic sociology framework of *orders of worth* (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005; Boltanski and Thévenot, 2006); and the figurational sociology framework of *established-outsider relations* (Elias and Scotson, 1994; Stanley, 2017). I use ‘heretofore disparate’ in order to emphasise that they have no previously known points of contact with one another, as well as to signal that they *are* mobilised in tandem, but only after their deployment in a ‘parallel’ fashion. Indeed, there is a clear tension between these frameworks in terms of what they seek to underline in their view of social relations and processes – a tension that was seen as productive, given the findings of my study. As I will elaborate on in the next section, this tension may be cast in terms of Norbert Elias’ (1956) notions of *involvement* and *detachment*: whereas the orders of worth framework foregrounds social actors’ everyday attempts to align their actions with certain universalistic principles such that they are able to claim and justify – to themselves as well as to others – detachment from their own individual and group interests; the established-outsider framework foregrounds situations where affective involvement in group-based conflicts over those interests – and the pursuit of power and status tied to them – prevails. Crucially, however, I depart from Elias’ suggestion that a higher degree of affectivity only characterises situations of



involvement. Rather, as will be seen later, *both* kinds of situations are suffused by affective flows, just of a different orientation: impassioned critiques and justifications on one end, versus more personal, stigmatising attacks that sometimes resemble racism on the other. In the forthcoming section, I touch upon some key aspects of the first approach of orders of worth, whilst further outlining the rationale behind its deployment in a ‘parallel’ form with figurational sociology. Each of them is then reviewed in detail in the forthcoming two chapters.

### ***Two ‘Planes’ of Relationality: A Battle for Values and A Battle for Power and Status***

From the early stages of ethnographic fieldwork in this study up until most of writing up had already concluded, I planned on engaging with only the pragmatic sociology framework of ‘orders of worth’ (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005; Boltanski and Thévenot, 2006) in analysing my empirical findings. An elaborate, multi-level framework that takes as its focus how critically competent and reflexive actors invoke a range of universalistic virtues in justifying their own actions as well as critiquing those of others (Lamont, 2010, p. 136), I had found it particularly useful in understanding how a wide range of controversies, disagreements and arguments encountered during my fieldwork were related to ongoing shifts in the economic ordering of the taxicab trade. Previously dubbed a kind of ‘folk sociology’ (Celikates, 2012), it refuses the *de facto* privileging of second-order sociological analyses over the actors’ own reflexive accounts of why they do what they do, sharing the methodological principle with Actor-Network Theory that the foremost task of the sociologist is to ‘follow the actors themselves’ (Celikates, 2012, p. 166; Latour, 2005, p. 61). This is owed to its recognition of social actors as morally complex beings, equipped with the axiological competencies to navigate and switch between multiple justificatory registers depending on the situation in which they find themselves (Thévenot, 2002; Heinich, 2020).

All such registers of justification constitute ‘orders of worth’ in the sense that they provide a ‘grammar’ or framework of well-recognised virtues and logics in line with which persons, things and activities may be evaluated (Boltanski and Thévenot, 2006). And in a practical sense, they

provide a normative orientation for coordinating action, thus performing the role of ‘action regimes’ or ‘worlds of practical commonality’ (Barthe et al., 2013; Honneth, 2010). The aspect of normative orientation is key: these orders of worth never truly reflect the actors’ world as is, but rather serve as *ideal* forms that they refer to in critiquing that world, marked as it may be by a range of perceived injustices. Pragmatic sociology thus seeks to dissect the linkages between actors’ critiques and the lived, ‘practical contradictions’ that give rise to them (Barthe et al., 2013), taking this as the starting point for mapping the relations they are enrolled in. This task is undertaken at the level of *situations* where evaluations of persons, things and activities come into question, referred to as ‘tests’ or ‘trials’ [*épreuves*]. Taking these tests and trials as the site where the always-problematic reproduction of social order takes place, over and over again, pragmatic sociology attempts to strike a balance between ‘[accounting] for the influence of the established (*institué*) [i.e., well-recognised virtues; distributions of power and status sustained in their name] on practices without feeling obligated to underestimate the strength of the establishing (*instituant*) resulting from these very practices’ (Barthe et al., p. 204).

As noted above, the central analytical focus for pragmatic sociology has long been situations where actors exercise their critical capacities in ‘qualifying’ the worth of persons, activities and things, with this continual reflexivity being linked to the ordering of social relations (Boltanski and Thévenot, 2006). Albeit it does consider how the mobilisation of ‘material and organizational supports’ can skew the chances of a given critique being able to shift the current state of such an ordering, it nonetheless ‘refuse[s] to equate all social actions with strategic behaviors indexed to the pursuit of individual or collective interests’ (Barthe et al., 2013, p. 184). The latter means, in simple terms, that conflicts over *power* and *status*, or in other words domination and symbolic violence, are not considered the ‘bottom line’ of social relations. On the contrary, scholars in this tradition contend that there are fleeting and precarious situations where actors try to *rise above* these conflicts, striving for coordination and ‘equivalence’ in line with well-recognised virtues from one or more orders of worth [e.g., *functional efficiency* in the

*industrial* order, *creativity* in the *inspired* order]. Equivalence here refers to the achievement of a hierarchy of worth that is deemed legitimate, since someone's or something's status in it can be qualified in terms of an order of worth with a 'higher level of generality' (Boltanski and Thévenot, 2006, p. 33).

With respect to this premise, it is helpful to recall that Luc Boltanski, one of the founders of pragmatic sociology, was a former student of Pierre Bourdieu who eventually diverged from his view that social actors always operate in 'fields' [or 'social spaces'], taking up 'positions' that significantly – if not entirely – delimit their manoeuvres towards higher chances of power and status (Hilgers and Mangez, 2015, p. 10; Atkinson, 2020, p. 322). Taking issue with what he thought was a deterministic view of social relations, as well as an undue privileging of sociological critique over 'everyday' critique, Boltanski (2011, p. 26) contended that the critical operations of actors themselves – and the relational dynamics they set into motion – be taken seriously. In this sense, the realm of justifiable action should be seen as *distinct* from the strategic realm of domination and symbolic violence; whereas in the former actors strive to coordinate their actions and achieve equivalence, the same is not true in the latter. Likewise, when a critique is mounted in the former, it amounts to a critique of someone or something's association with a *modus vivendi* [way of being; ordering of worth] deemed illegitimate, whereas in the latter it is aimed directly at the actors one is positioned against.

Given the stance outlined above, can pragmatic sociology *also* account for conflicts of the second kind? And if so, how? The question has been the subject of various critiques levelled at the tradition (e.g., Honneth, 2010; Celikates, 2012; Susen, 2014; Friedland and Arjalies, 2017; Atkinson, 2020). However, it is useful to begin by considering two possible avenues that do allow for an engagement with inequalities of power and status, and which were considered in the context of this thesis. First, there is Boltanski's later argument that power inheres in 'test formats' devised and controlled by institutions, which can effectuate domination of different social groups

(2011, p. 9). A somewhat similar line of thought was followed by Thévenot when he sought to combine a diversification of notions of capitals with that of the modes of coordination [i.e., orders of worth] that ‘enable their valorization’, and argued that shifts in the valuation and recognition of these capitals and modes of coordination by ‘policies and institutions’ represent the exercise of ‘power to “make people do things”’ (2015, pp. 73-74). The first avenue, therefore, centres on the role of institutions.

Another avenue is to try and locate conflicts over power and status in terms of Thévenot’s (2001; 2007) model of ‘pragmatic regimes of engagement’, which outlines two realms of action ‘below’ that of justifications: a familiar milieu; and regular planned action. The latter two regimes do not involve the conventional qualifications of persons, things and activities that are required in the regime of justification, wherein actions and evaluations ‘must be valid for a third party’ (Thévenot, 2007, p. 417). Here, Thévenot posited that the three regimes together constitute a ‘vertical plurality’ along the lines of increasing ‘commonization’ or level of generality, thereby adding to the complexity of social life effected by the plurality of orders of worth in the justifiable action regime (p. 418). On the question of power, he characterised new forms of management and work organisation that blur the boundaries between the ‘most strongly global and the closest and most familiar’, whilst not recognising and remunerating for engagements of the latter kind [familiarity], as a ‘situation of exploitation’ (pp. 419-420).

Once again, what we encounter is an institution-centric view, which whilst being insightful fails to address the manner in which actors engage in power struggles against not just institutions, but also *each other*. Given that Thévenot (2007) distinguished between the three regimes based on differing degrees of ‘dependence on an *engaged* [material] environment...[from which]...the *agent* derives his *capacity*, understood as the *power* to maintain that engagement’ (p. 415; emphasis in original), one is led to wonder whether this environment may also limit the ways in which an agent is able to qualify themselves in the justifiable action regime, and whether the

regime of engagement in a plan might also entail agents strategically positioning themselves against each other, erecting group boundaries in the process; however, none of these scenarios were considered by him.

After appraising the aforementioned avenues, it was concluded that conflicts over power and status *among actors themselves* – found to be discernible in this study – could not be adequately interrogated in terms of the orders of worth framework. Prior critiques that this framework takes an overly ‘rationalist view of the social’ (Susen, 2014, p. 26) and is vulnerable to being ‘one-dimensional’ in its exclusion of ‘alternative, non-moral action orientations’ (Honneth, 2010, pp. 388, 383) were found to have some merit, even if I continued to dispute the proposition that this necessitates a return to the underlining of the ‘co-implication of coordination and domination’ (Friedland and Arjalies, 2017, p. 53; Atkinson, 2020). Oriented in the first instance towards the problematics of coordination, this framework proved extremely valuable in analysing the dynamics of controversy surrounding the shifting economic ordering of the taxicab trade, to which most of my ethnographic data pertained. Conversations with all my participants typically began with and centred on topics relating to ‘matters of the trade’: the rise of Uber and the decline of hackney carriage, deregulation, algorithmic pricing and management, among others. This pivotal focus meant that a number of justifications and critiques, indicative of the kind of qualifications that were being sought by participants, were often able to flow naturally. However, in the course of repeat engagements with long-term participants, I also came across another arena of social relations: one where actors were *not* striving for equivalence, and were engaged in a quest for power, status, or in simple terms self-enhancement as measured against other actors (Elias, 1990, p. 226; Stanley, 2017).

Moments where data on the second kind of conflict came forth often happened in quick succession to discussions on ‘matters of the trade’, where critiques were being mounted in terms of virtues from different orders of worth. This indicated that there were constant slippages

between two distinct *planes of relationality*: moral regimes and critical operations oriented towards equivalence on one end; and strategic battles over power and status on the other. It must be reiterated that this was only true for *long-term participants*. By default, all participants were reticent in expressing their views on, for instance, tensions between different communal groups represented in the trade, which included but were not limited to those of an ‘interethnic’ nature. It was only after enough rapport had been established over successive ethnographic engagements – interviews at coffee shops, participant-observation during ride-alongs in their cabs and meals together at takeaways, occasional light-hearted exchanges of messages over social media platforms, and so forth – that some of them began to use language and share stories that would not, in all likelihood, have been considered ‘legitimate’ with a complete stranger. In other words, it was this ethnographic methodology that allowed for the cultivation of a level of comfort and familiarity that, in turn, led to them *breaching* the rules tied to the imperative of justifications in terms of orders of worth. That imperative did not disappear, however; it would quickly return whenever the flow of conversation reverted to ‘matters of the trade’. Such were the slippages between two distinct ‘planes’ of relationality: one where participants would call upon different orders of worth in a movement towards detachment from their own individual and group interests; and another where they were taken over, so to speak, by involvement in those interests.

Somewhat akin to what Elias (1956) posited long ago, these are two ends of a continuum: one approximating a higher degree of *reflexivity* that is oriented towards coordination, the other of its minimisation, whereby any attempts at such coordination recede and strategic conflicts among different groups come to the fore. Just as he observed, long-term participants were seen to ‘shift hither and thither’ between them, ‘in ways none of them intended’ (Elias, 1956, pp. 226, 232). As for the nature of the interaction between them, I understand it in terms of Deleuze and

Guattari's (1984) notion of 'reciprocal presupposition'<sup>24</sup>: neither of them determines the other, yet cannot acquire its form independently of the other's slippages or 'interferences' (Law, 2004) in it. It was my eventual fascination with these slippages that led to the formation of a key hypothesis in this thesis: does an increasing incidence of *failures of qualification* in terms of orders of worth – or of qualifications whose value has been practically, if not formally, eroded – lead to a higher degree of involvement in, and thus slippages into, strategic, out-for-your-own battles for power and status? I shall return to this question later in the thesis; for now, I would urge the reader to keep it in mind as they progress to the forthcoming chapters on empirical findings.

Once I had realised during writing up that the available evidence pointed towards two distinct planes of relationality, and that there appeared to be slippages between them, for several months I grappled with the question of whether data on the second plane needed to be taken up for analysis in this thesis. Eventually, after much deliberation on whether I am doing justice to the stories of long-term participants on one end, and on the significance of the slippages between the two planes of relationality on the other, I reached the determination that the second plane constituted an immutable aspect of my findings, which could not be set aside. Since the conflicts over power and status that came up in conversations with long-term participants had a distinct group-based, territorial, us-versus-them quality to them, and were at the same time highly affectively charged, I decided that the figurational sociology framework of established-outsider relations (Elias and Scotson, 1994; Stanley, 2017) is best suited to analysing them. In this manner, I arrived at the final organisation of the thesis: three empirical chapters devoted to dissecting the first plane of moral regimes and critical operations; and one empirical chapter, akin to an article, which presents a *partial* examination of the second plane, of figurational conflict over power and

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<sup>24</sup> The notion originally refers to the interaction between 'form of content' and 'form of expression' – the *material* and *expressive* dimensions of assemblages, respectively (see Deleuze and Guattari, 1988, pp. 50-51). Its terms are being transposed here to help understand a different dynamic.

status. Examining them in a ‘parallel’ manner comprises an unconventional organisation in the sense that it may be seen as taking the reader on two separate journeys; however, I would reassert that these are sociological forays into two *distinct* planes of relationality, which albeit interacting with one another, have their own logics and intricacies that merit attention in their own right. The best way to think about their interaction, therefore, is after going on these forays.

Over the course of the four empirical chapters, I also engage with several ‘second-level’ theoretical tools that are directly weaved into the two overarching frameworks, as well as prior research work that helps contextualise the findings taken up for analysis. These will be introduced and elaborated upon in the course of those chapters themselves. Prior to concluding this overview of my theoretical lens, however, it is necessary to briefly set out some underlying positions that comprise the *relational* ontological stance assumed throughout this thesis. This is done in terms of certain key tenets of yet another tradition that I have previously drawn upon in my work, and which has remained instrumental in shaping my theoretical orientation as a sociologist: assemblage thinking (Khan, 2022). An indication of this has already been seen in my mention of ‘method assemblage’ at the very beginning of this chapter (Law, 2004). Whilst only intermittently deployed in this study, three core concepts from the framework of assemblage theory, as well as the adjacent approaches of affect theory and Actor-Network Theory [ANT], continued to inform my understanding of social relations in this study: *affect*; *assemblage*; and the tension between *territorialization* and *detrterritorialization* in processes of social change. In the following section, I briefly review these concepts, at the same time highlighting their relevance to the ontological positioning taken in this thesis.

### ***Underlying Concepts: Affect, Assemblage and Territorialization-Detrterritorialization***

A necessary prelude to reviewing the aforementioned three concepts is to note that they have been integral in the devising of conceptual-methodological approaches that are ‘transversal to a range of social theory dualisms such as structure/agency, reason/emotion, human/non-human,



animate/inanimate and inside/outside’ (Fox and Alldred, 2015, p. 399). Instead, social problematics are conceptualised in terms of processual, contingent, and volatile enactments of relationality among a heterogeneity of animate and inanimate elements. The notion of *assemblage* seeks out the logic of how a given web of relations comes alive; as Buchanan aptly writes, it is the ordering or ‘yoke’ that fastens them together, a ‘virtual entity with actual effects’ (2015, p. 384; 2017, p. 473). Crucially, any given assemblage relates *material* elements with *expressive* ones, instigating a co-articulation of the two (Buchanan, 2021, pp. 32-35) – a theme that will recur at various points throughout the thesis. In tracing the diverse elements that might be enrolled into a given assemblage, I sometimes deploy Actor-Network Theory’s notion of ‘actant’, denoting *anything* ‘that acts or to which activity is granted by others’ (Latour, 1996, p. 375; 2005, pp. 71–72). A key variation of the notion that will often appear as a supplementary aid is that of ‘socio-technical assemblage’, which specifically brings to the fore the active agency of non-human, ‘technical’ actants, for instance the taxi meter (del Nido, 2020) or the Uber app (Rosenblat and Stark, 2016). In mobilising all these notions, I attempted to follow assemblage theory’s methodological principle that an empirical mapping of relations must be *spatiotemporally specific*, tracing ‘specific articulations among a myriad of heterogeneous [material and expressive] elements in flux’ (Pedersen et al., 2017, p. 161) or ‘constellations’ (Deleuze and Guattari, 1988, pp. 464-45), along with how these evolve over time. This is a principle also found in pragmatic sociology, which follows ‘the way in which *situations* are disposed and...conduct judged’ in the course of everyday life (Thévenot, 2007, p. 410; emphasis in original), as well as figurational sociology, for which any analysis of group tensions cannot be detached from ‘the specificities of particular times and places’ (Stanley, 2017).

The operationalisation of assemblage thinking is inseparable from the Spinozist notion of *affect*, denoting capacities to affect or be affected that are productive of shifts from one state of being to another (Deleuze, 1978; Deleuze and Guattari, 1988, pp. 303–304; Massumi, 1995, p. 105; Thrift, 2007, pp. 178-80; Fox, 2015, p. 306). Instead of agency, it is ‘affective flows’ (Fox and

Allred, 2015) that are seen as being the impetus of any given assemblage. Deciphering an assemblage therefore entails an attentiveness to affective flows passing *between* its constituent elements, not just those elements themselves. My engagement with pragmatic sociology marks a departure from this stance in that it mainly focuses on the relational dynamics set in motion by the critical capacities of rational, reflexive actors (Susen, 2014); however, for the purposes of my ontological positioning, it is necessary to reiterate that the exercise of such capacities is seen as being *inseparable* from the dimension of affective flows, which can always infuse them. That many critiques encountered over the course of this study were impassioned in nature is testament to this. The second approach of figurational sociology, in contrast, explicitly foregrounds the role of affect in its framework of group relations, even if it does not assume the conceptual vocabulary of affect theory itself (Elias and Scotson, 1994). *Relationality*, then, is seen as being intrinsically affective, even where the character of this affectivity is oriented towards equivalence and coordination rather than ‘status-battles and struggles for position’ (Elias, 1950, p. 308), thus enabling it to resemble a more reflexive, ‘rational’ state (Barthe et al., 2013, p. 188). As I noted in the previous section, the continuum between these two orientations is read in terms of Elias’ (1956) ideas on involvement and detachment, except that these notions are *not* taken to denote opposite ‘poles’ of affectivity – one of its maximisation and the other its minimisation – but rather the charging of two different orientations of affective flows. Affect is, therefore, a common thread running through both planes of relationality, as well as the crises of self-worth that were, in turn, located within them.

Lastly, it should be noted that assemblage thinking sees the course of social production as being nonlinear or ‘rhizomatic’ (Deleuze and Guattari, 1988, p. 7), characterised by opposing tendencies or ‘rupturing’ flows (Fox and Allred 2015). The rhizomatic nature of affective flows means that at any given time, there are affective flows stabilising relational capacities that cement or *territorialize* a given assemblage, as well as those which simultaneously and conversely *deterritorialize* the assemblage (Buchanan 2021, pp. 88–89; DeLanda, 2006, p. 19; Deleuze and

Guattari, 1988, pp. 387–89); however the chaos of the latter tends to be resisted by immediate *reterritorialization* (Buchanan, 2017, p. 463), whereby stabilising capacities are preserved in a new form. As will be seen later, this view of social relations as being productive-yet-constraining is shared, in important ways, with the aforementioned two approaches directly mobilised in this thesis. The reason why it is being outlined in terms of assemblage thinking is because it is through *this* framework that its expression in those approaches was first understood, and in terms of the three key tenets that have been reviewed in this section, continued to be understood.

### 3.2. First Plane: Orders of Worth

Earlier in Part II [Background] of the thesis, I spoke about the rise of Uber as a controversy that is delineable in itself, and also as a meta-controversy that encompasses several controversies centred on more particular issues, like ‘e-hailing’ and ‘cross-border hire’. In either case, it is a controversy borne of conflict over the *economic ordering* of the taxicab trade, which – from the ontological positioning assumed in this thesis – necessarily translates into conflict over the socio-technical, legal, discursive, affective and other forms of elements that constitute the ordering of one economic form versus another. Yet how participants recognised an economic ordering, and the articulation of the myriad elements it involved, was equally a matter of the virtues, principles, and normative orientation that underpinned it. That they could insist, for instance, that driving a hackney carriage is a *profession* whereas driving for Uber is not, relied on connecting certain universalistic virtues to specific elements of the economic ordering of the hackney carriage trade [e.g., topographical route tests like the Knowledge of London], in order to substantiate and *qualify* their worth (Boltanski and Thévenot, 2006). In this manner, the defence or denunciation of an economic ordering was always bound up with the invocation of virtues of a well-recognised, universalistic nature.

The effects of the controversy of Uber’s rise, however, extended far beyond conflict over economic organisation alone. In the course of fieldwork, it was found to be a schism affecting both ‘planes’ of relationality examined in this thesis: moral regimes and everyday justifications relating to conflict over economic organisation on one end; and established-outsider conflicts over power and status on the other, which exceeded the boundaries of the former conflict. In this chapter, I review the theoretical approach I mobilise in dissecting the first of these planes: pragmatic sociology. This approach was enrolled in order to draw out the intricacies of how the controversy over the economic ordering of the taxicab trade unfolds, and is reproduced, *in practice*. My own, hybrid operationalisation of this approach involved four key resources: the framework of ‘orders

of worth’ and the notion of ‘investments in form’ from the pragmatic sociology literature (Thévenot, 1984; Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005; Boltanski and Thévenot, 2006); the STS concept of ‘market devices’ (Muniesa et al., 2007; McFall, 2009; McFall et al., 2017); and work in digital sociology and STS on the ‘platform’ business model (Srnicek, 2016). As will become clear shortly, the latter three concepts are *weaved into* my operationalisation of the key framework of ‘orders of worth’ (Boltanski and Thévenot, 2006).

The orders of worth framework builds upon Boltanski and Thévenot’s (2006) argument that a number of ‘legitimate’, well-recognised forms of social ordering, including those of an economic nature, embody core principles of a common model – that of the ‘polity’ (pp. 74–79). At the centre of this polity model lies a tension that it seeks to continually resolve: between the ‘principle of common humanity’ that establishes equivalence among persons as human beings vested with the same ‘dignity’, as in the ability to attain access to a higher state of worth; and the concurrent, necessarily unequal ordering of different states of worth. It is by tying the hierarchy of worth to a ‘common good’, such that worth attributed to those at a higher state [or ‘status’] becomes framed as ‘beneficial to the polity as a whole’ (p. 76), that this tension is resolved. Boltanski and Thévenot use the term ‘higher common principle’ to encapsulate this underpinning of the hierarchy of worth by a common good.

Whether or not coordination through recourse to a higher common principle is needed depends on the situation at hand, and how it is achieved differs based on the definition of the common good, thereby opening up the possibility of multiple ‘orders of worth’. There are seven such orders that have been discussed in the work of Boltanski and Thévenot (2006), and later of Boltanski and Chiapello (2005): *inspired*; *domestic*; *reputational [fame]*; *civic*; *industrial*; *market [commercial]*; and *connexionist [projective/network]*. Each of the aforementioned orders of worth may also be seen as a ‘world’ or ‘polity’ in itself – with its own ‘collection of archetypes, people, objects and practices typically associated with it’ (Atkinson, 2020, p. 313) –

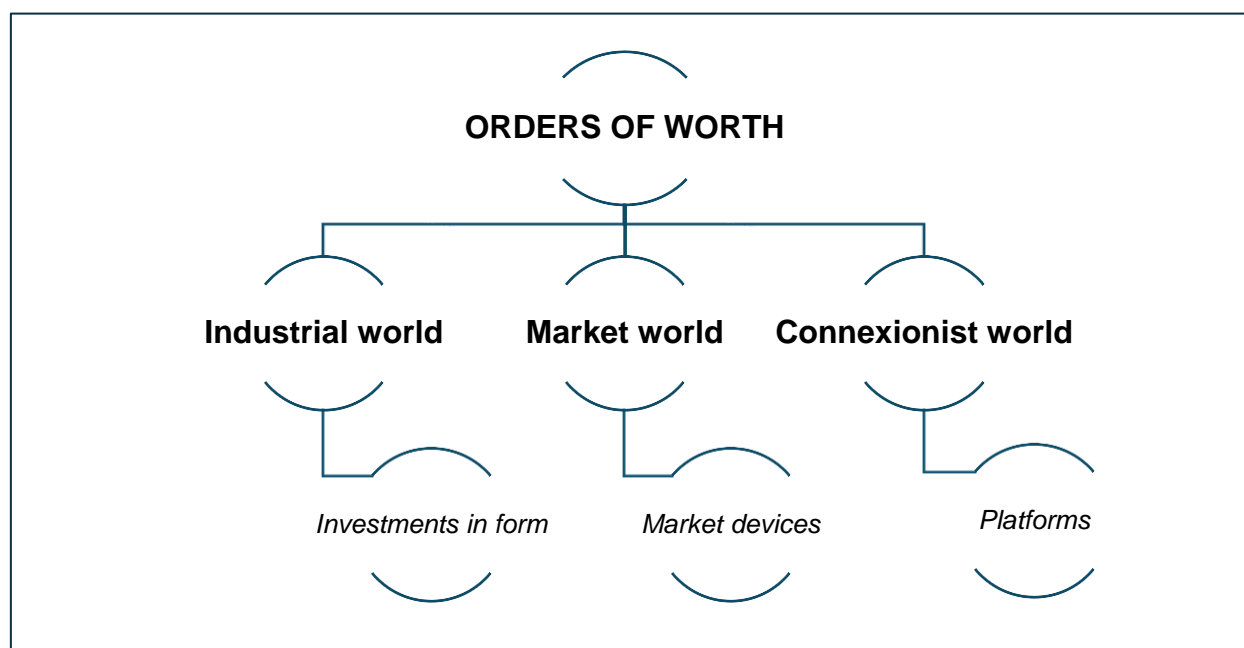
as long as it is remembered that actors may switch between them from one situation to the next. The prerequisite to them being called upon by actors in coordinating, justifying and legitimating their actions in the course of everyday life is them facing a situation marked by the threat of a double disagreement: one with a cognitive *and* moral element. The cognitive level pertains to the understanding of the situation, what the appropriate frame for it should be, and what is needed to reach agreement. When agreement over an appropriate frame cannot be reached, however, recourse must be made to the moral underpinnings of different frames, or in other words, the higher common principles attached to them. It is the content of the higher common principle tied to each of the different orders of worth, for instance *competition* in the *market* order, that forms the basis of justifications deployed by the actors identifying with it. So a clash of higher common principles translates into a clash of justifications, and vice versa<sup>25</sup>. The relation between different orders in such clashes comes to be determined by the polity model's overall orientation towards realising a *singular* form of coordination: at any given time, therefore, it seeks to accord primacy to a 'common good' tied to a single order of worth, whilst reducing those tied to the others to the status of a 'private good' (Boltanski and Thévenot, 2006, p. 78). It is in line with this fundamental aspect of the polity model that I attempt to trace and dissect tensions between three different orders of worth seen to be invoked in the conflict over the shifting economic ordering of the taxicab trade, all of whom strive for a form of generality that would exclude the other orders.

An empirical attention to the ways in which cognitive frames are oriented by orders of worth of a *moral* nature in this manner allows for tracing continuities between the abstract and the practical [or the 'macro' and the 'micro'] levels of social phenomena, or alternatively the making of the abstract *in* practice, in effect suspending the distinction between these; it is in this sense that the approach has come to be referred to as 'pragmatic sociology'. In the remainder of

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<sup>25</sup> To stress this point wherever it is appropriate to do so, I sometimes switch to the referents 'regimes/modes of justification' for orders of worth, particularly in those parts of the thesis where I discuss critiques underpinned by these orders. These are drawn from the terminology employed in *The New Spirit of Capitalism* (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005).

this chapter, I proceed to discuss three orders of worth – *industrial*, *market* and *connexionist*. These are the orders of worth that participate in the organisation of economic activity today (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005), and all of them were seen to be important in how the conflict over the economic ordering of the taxicab trade was encountered in the course of ethnographic fieldwork. As noted earlier, my engagement with these orders interweaves an engagement with three additional concepts – ‘investments in form’, ‘market devices’ and ‘platforms’. The rationale behind engaging with these concepts is to further unpack certain key features of these orders [see Figure 4 below], while at the same time laying the groundwork for analysis of ethnographic data in the forthcoming empirical chapters.



**Figure 4:** Conceptual map for analysing the controversy over economic forms in the wake of Uber's rise

### ***The Industrial World: Codification through Investments in Form***

Extending beyond the realms of commodity production alone, the *industrial* order is also where ‘technological objects and scientific methods have their place’ (Boltanski and Thévenot, 2006, p. 203). The higher common principle orienting the coordination of action in this world, as well as judgements and critiques associated with it, is *efficiency* defined in terms of functional

performance, as opposed to its cost-based evaluation found in the *market* world. Several features of this order were found to be present in arguments relating to the shifting economic ordering of the taxicab trade, and it is important in particular for understanding the pre-existing landscape of regulation, and the relations stabilised by it, that Uber had to contend with following its entry into the UK market. The approach I take to outlining these features is to define them and give some indications of what aspects of economic organisation they relate to in this section, before unpacking them further in relation to ethnographic findings in a subsequent chapter. A similar approach is taken in the next two sub-sections on the *market* and *connexionist* orders.

The first feature of the industrial order that is relevant to the context of this study is that of *codification*. Codification, or in other words standardisation of forms such that they are rendered discrete, measurable and comparable, can be observed across a diverse array of contexts: legal statutes, statistical categories, biomedical categories of disease, scientific methods, work processes akin to those developed by Fred Taylor, just to mention a few (Weber, 1964; Desrosières et al., 1983; Thévenot, 1984). Whilst the achievement of a code form is a painstaking affair and may sometimes prove precarious in practice, as was shown for the disease of atherosclerosis by Annemarie Mol (2002), forms that assume a relatively stable, ‘rigid’ state are valued in the *industrial* order of worth as they lend themselves to the predictable, efficient functioning of beings engaged in a given activity – whether that be scientific research, business management, medical diagnosis, bureaucratic procedures, or anything else. With respect to the economic ordering of the taxicab trade, it is helpful to briefly focus attention on one specific kind of codification: that of occupational groups. Scholars have previously traced the origins of occupational classification to the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and the consolidation of the usage of occupational codes, including as official statistical categories, to the period after the Second World War (Thévenot, 1984; Amossé, 2013; Thévenot, 2016). Characterised by the reign of what pragmatic sociologists have termed the ‘second spirit of capitalism’, this period saw the expansion of bureaucratisation on state, corporate and union levels; hierarchization in terms of social class;



and the general ascendancy of a social ordering or polity aligned with the *industrial* and *civic* orders of worth (Boltanski, 1987; Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005). The term ‘spirit of capitalism’, as indicated earlier, denotes ‘the set of beliefs associated with the capitalist order that helps to justify this order and, by legitimating them, to sustain the *forms of action and predispositions* compatible with it’ (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005, p. 36; emphasis added).

Arising from within this broader historical current of capitalist organisation, the codification of occupational groups entails processes and procedures that aim to render all those forming part of such groups as *equivalents*, irrespective of any other personal qualities they may have (Thévenot, 1984, p. 13). Achieving equivalence is the prerequisite to the setting out of ‘competencies and responsibilities’ (Boltanski and Thévenot, 2006, p. 206) that define the functional activity undertaken by members of an occupational group. This is applicable to people seeking to work in the UK’s taxicab trade, who must go through a licensing process that qualifies them as either a hackney carriage or private hire driver. As discussed in Part II [Background] of the thesis, the establishment of the current regulatory regime for taxicabs was the result of a lengthy, cumulative process, involving not just legal statutes going back over three centuries, but also multiple rounds of negotiation involving both state institutions [Parliament, transport officials, local authorities, the courts] as well as representatives of the hackney and private hire sectors, who, like all occupational groups, have lobbied<sup>26</sup> ‘to achieve legal codification of a more advantageous kind’ (Thévenot, 1984, p. 4; see also Desrosières et al., 1983).

As noted earlier in Part II, the licensing regime for the hackney carriage trade has been formulated over a longer period and is more stringent, with topographical route tests like the

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<sup>26</sup> At the time of the passage of the *Private Hire Vehicles (London) Act 1998*, several parliamentarians raised concerns, and in other cases gave assurances, on how might this legislation be designed in such manner as to protect the hackney carriages’ exclusive right to ‘ply for hire’ on the streets of the capital. Take, for instance, the following words of the former MP for Croydon South, Richard Ottaway: ‘We can reassure the black cab trade: if there is a thriving unregulated minicab [PHV] trade without the legislation, *surely regulation will take the cowboys out of the system* and ensure that only approved drivers and vehicles are on the streets of London. There is no threat to black cabs’ (Ottaway, 1998; emphasis added).

Knowledge of London and complex vehicle specifications<sup>27</sup> forming part of requirements that must be met before applicants can ‘ply for hire’ in a market where entry is regulated, and price competition banned. Both topographical route tests and vehicle specifications are two examples of *implements* – tools, standards, processes – that participate in the process of qualification. Implements like the Knowledge may also be characterised as *professional qualifications* that not only control entry into the sector, but also allow drivers to identify themselves with the codified occupational form and the entire history of how it came to be (Boltanski and Thévenot, 2006, p. 206) – an identity<sup>28</sup> that, as we will see in the empirical chapter on the industrial world, played a key role in how critiques were formulated in the wake of Uber’s rise. The coveted ‘green badges’ issued to hackney carriage drivers in London upon passing the Knowledge, as well as other equivalent badges elsewhere in the country, are a material artefact that attest to their qualification as professionals, and have an affective force attached to them for this reason.

Closely connected to the aspect of codification of occupational forms, is the role of *investments* in such forms. In fact it is investments, or sacrifices made in the present for a return in the long term, that effectuate the reproduction of relations tied to a certain form – their ‘synchronic articulation’, as Boltanski and Thévenot (2006, p. 204) put it – and extend it into the future. Here it is necessary to differentiate between investments aligned with the *industrial* world, which require coordination of beings oriented towards long-term returns of a *functional* nature, and the investment formula in the *market* world, which privileges *profitability* irrespective of functional value, and thus does not place the same premium on predictability and continuity. The former kind of investments involve a rational optimisation of the beings involved, with roles and responsibilities clearly delineated, in an operation that unfolds over time and is ‘not situated in

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<sup>27</sup> An example of this is the requirement for London black cabs to have a ‘turning circle’ of no greater than 25ft [7.62m], so they are able to U-turn in one go in any narrow street, or hotel entrance, in London (London Assembly, 2019).

<sup>28</sup> This professional identity is understood and investigated as being separate to that tied to figurational [established-outsider] positioning, discussed in a separate empirical chapter in Part V.

continuity with the immediate satisfaction of a desire, in the extension of a market coordination’ (Boltanski and Thévenot, 2006, p. 210). This is why, when ‘problems dealt with as instances of cheating on real quality’ arise, they are raised with ‘the implicit reference to a different form of value, *often industrial in nature*’ (p. 210; emphasis added). In short, then, functional value is derived from both the continuation of a codified form over time, lending it predictability, as well as its inscription into space: in short, a *spatiotemporal* articulation.

The aforementioned points on investments are clarified further by tapping into Thévenot’s notion of *investments in form*, which specifically addresses the role of investments of a codifying, functional nature. He defines *investments in form* as ‘procedures that treat people and objects in homogenous ways across contexts’ (2002, p. 57), cumulatively amounting to ‘a costly operation to establish a stable relation *with a certain lifespan*’ (1984, p. 8; emphasis added; 2007, p. 413). It is necessary to note that, whilst resonating with its orientation towards predictability, they are not unique to the *industrial* world, and can be found in different variations in articulations of relations tied to multiple orders of worth. For without the underpinning role played by such investments – the core relational infrastructure they provide, so to speak – any form of coordination cannot extend itself. In the context of the present discussion, however, it is useful to foreground the salient role they have in the *industrial* world, and in particular their relationship with codified occupational forms. It is these investments that, over time, have ‘economic effects’ that extend such forms over a larger ‘area of validity’ (1984, p.24), with ‘validity’ denoting the reproduction of that form across time and space.

Such investments towards greater validity and durability entail the codified form being ‘equipped’ with various *implements* that aim to achieve control over the spatiotemporal articulation of a given activity; these may be of a legal, technological, procedural, or any other kind (Thévenot, 1984, pp. 7, 12). Whereas taxicab driving is by nature a very mobile and itinerant occupation, with space and time not codified to the extent that they are in conventional ‘industrial’

roles like those based in an office or factory environment, a number of *implements* aimed at regulating market entry, pricing and some qualitative aspects of work [like the drivers' skills and conduct] can still be observed, and it is the relational effects of these implements that I engage with in my analysis of ethnographic findings. Among these are standardised qualification procedures that require investment in the occupational form on an *individual* level, for example applicants studying for the Knowledge of London over a number of years, paying the 'price of efforts' (Boltanski and Thévenot, 2006, p. 208) exacted by the prospect of obtaining the mark of their qualification, the coveted 'green badge', one day. The development of such qualification procedures is underpinned by all the legal statutes reviewed previously in Part II, but especially the *Transport Act 1985*, which made a 'two-tier' system of taxicab licensing mandatory for local authorities across the country. Both these statutes, as well as *each* iteration of a license being issued and implements like topographical route tests being put to work by different local authorities, can be said to extend the area of validity of the occupational forms of hackney carriage and private hire sectors.

To recast these points on *investments in form* aligned with *industrial* worth solely in terms of taxicab driving, it may be argued that the codification of this occupational form is one that organises it in line with an *ideal* of an efficient, professional and reliable taxicab service: a service rooted in tests of functionality rather than 'a market evaluation that would result immediately from a service provided' (Boltanski and Thévenot, 2006, p. 206). These tests of functionality demand that a taxi driver be qualified to navigate around the area they work in, not refuse fares arbitrarily, that they be medically fit, not have a criminal record, drive a vehicle that is 'purpose-built', and so forth. Alternatively speaking, it is a world of taxi driving where 'the great persons are the experts [*qualified*, licensed drivers]. The words used to describe their personal qualities can also be used to qualify things [purpose-built taxis]. They are said to be worthy when they are efficient, productive, operational' (Boltanski and Thévenot, 1999, p. 373). Again, this description fits more closely with the hackney carriage trade. That its legally codified form goes back over

three centuries tells us about the durability of its *temporal* articulation, whereas the long-standing demarcation of taxi ranks, vehicle specifications like the turning circle requirement in London, and the codified right of hackney carriages to drive in bus lanes [marked on road signage across the country] are examples of the *spatial* inscription of this form.

### ***The Market World: Stabilising Flows through Market Devices***

The second of three forms of coordination that shape the organisation of economic activity today, the *market* order is characterised by the shared pursuit of '[scarce] objects that are common to diverse desires' (Boltanski and Thévenot, 2006, p. 199). Action is orientated by *competition* among buyers and sellers, which is the higher common principle underpinning this order of worth. For those who assume the role of sellers, it is continually evaluated in terms of *profitability*, which is the 'model test' of this world – in other words, the '[situation] when the status of persons and things are revealed with especial clarity' (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005, p. 125). Whereas I connected the *industrial* order to the pre-existing regulatory framework of the taxicab trade, my engagement with the *market* order is directed firstly at accounting for the extremely itinerant nature of the occupation, involving unpredictable flows of people, money, traffic, weather, roadworks, and myriad other human and non-human actants. Certain well-known slogans like 'Be Lucky!' [among London black cabbies] capture the manner in which such flows have always been a hallmark of the taxicab trade. As will become clear over the course of this section, an organisation of relations aligned with the *market* order of worth plays an important role in both driving these flows, as well as in taming and stabilising them to some extent, particularly with respect to the minimisation of distortion in the conduct of *transactions* between buyers and sellers. Beyond this wider aspect of flows, the *market* order also provides insight into two key aspects of the conflict over economic organisation in the wake of Uber's rise: the relations constituting the work environment of Uber drivers as compared to hackney carriage drivers, with the former more closely approximating a *market* form of coordination; and,

relatedly, the Uber app as an algorithmic *market device* that has displaced the position formerly held by another such device, that of the taxi meter.

A number of shifts effected by the rise of Uber to the work relations of taxicab driving may be usefully clarified with reference to certain key features of the *market* order of worth. First, it is in line with the qualities of buyer and seller, which form prerequisites to the event of goods and services being exchanged [the transaction], that equivalence among beings [common humanity] is achieved in the market world; individuals entering into a transaction must therefore be *detached* from all other qualities tied to a different order of worth, for instance *professional qualifications* of an *industrial* nature. This type of equivalence stands out more starkly in the context of Uber driving: those booking a ride on the Uber app are qualified as *customers* above all else, and the drivers as *sellers* providing a service desired by those customers. Yet it is not just individuals who are detached in this manner; for a transaction to take place, the goods and services being pursued must also be clearly separated from both the qualities of the individuals [sellers] who supply them, as well as any other qualities besides the value they hold for the buyers who pursue them (Boltanski and Thévenot, 1999).

With respect to the transportation service provided by the Uber app, the former aspect of this separation, which relates to distinguishing the desired object from those who supply it, means that no single Uber driver defines, or alters, the identity of the service of Uber itself; in other words, the labour of Uber drivers becomes a ‘commodity separable from the person of those performing it’ (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005, p. 89). And the latter aspect, relating to the uniqueness of the desired object as a ‘market good’ made available for commercial exchange, means that the Uber app is qualified solely in terms of the value it offers to the customers who use it, whether that be affordability, convenience, reliability by their own standard, or anything else. Codification and *investments in form*, for example branding and software reliability testing to ensure the smooth functioning of the Uber app, are aimed primarily at meeting the expectations

of the customers, so repeat transactions become possible and the number of customers can increase over time. The corollary to this privileging of qualities valued by the customers is that – as an object in the market world – the Uber app does 'not have the same quality as objects in the industrial world, which are valued for their efficiency, their *functional* character' (Boltanski and Thévenot, 2006, p. 199; emphasis added). Any evaluation of functional qualities, if present, becomes limited to the immediate moment of the *transaction*, as opposed to the durable, standardised character it has in the *industrial* world. Cast in terms of the polity model, this sidelining of the *industrial* maxim of *functional efficiency*, whether of persons, objects or activities, represents the reduction of a 'common good' to a 'private good' in the extension of a *market* polity (Boltanski and Thévenot, 2006, p. 78).

The value bestowed on a given object by its potential buyers is measured in terms of a price, which is underpinned by the monetary standard and should ideally encapsulate, and reflect, 'the *entire set* of the others' desires' for the product or service in question (Boltanski and Thévenot, 2006, p. 202; emphasis added). At the same time, however, it should be commensurate to their purchasing power: a price that, on average, does not exceed their willingness to engage in a transaction [or matches it to the closest extent possible]. The monetary standard exemplifies the purpose of codes and conventions, or *investments in form*, in the *market* world, which lay the groundwork for facilitating exchange of sought-after objects among interested *buyers* and *sellers* (see Thévenot, 1984, p. 22). This role of *investments in form* in the *market* world is further illustrated by tapping into the STS concept of *market devices*<sup>29</sup>, denoting any 'material or discursive assemblage that intervenes in the construction of markets...[and that] renders things, behaviours and processes economic' (Muniesa et al., 2007, pp. 2–3). Two such devices were encountered in the course of ethnographic fieldwork: the taximeter in hackney carriages; and the

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<sup>29</sup> These devices may also be understood as a particular kind of *implement* (Thévenot, 1984), albeit one that is located in the market world and pertains specifically to the qualification of buyers, sellers, and market goods in the immediate temporality of a transaction.

Uber app. It is necessary to reiterate that my focus is *not* on these socio-technical instruments as singular objects, but rather on the sets of relations they effectuate, leading to the arrangement of economic action in particular ways. As *market devices*, both the taxi meter and the Uber app equip the driver and their passenger with a codified form that promptly and unproblematically sets the terms of their exchange, *together with* the disposition to engage with that form: as a result, one can take a cab ‘without seeming to do very much at all’ (McFall, 2009, p. 279). Their operations therefore involve not just the exercise of particular socio-technical capacities, but also the emergence and cultivation of particular market-based subjectivities in those involved: it is in this sense that they constitute *assemblages* composed of both human and non-human actants.

Yet the precise manner in which each of these two devices achieves this facilitation of transactions is different, and so is the extent to which it can be deemed entirely consistent with the *market* order of worth. Dating back to the early 1900s<sup>30</sup>, the taximeter’s employment as a market device has been long inscribed in the overall legal framework for the hackney carriage sector, yet the manner of codification that it enables within that framework is aligned with the *market* order. As a measurement instrument that simultaneously functions as an ‘index’ or ‘multiplier’ (del Nido, 2020), it correlates time and distance travelled with fares [basic and incremental] fixed by the local authority, generating a ‘calculative space’ (Kjellberg, 2007) that in effect quantifies the value of *all* possible taxi rides. Although this makes transactions predictable and straightforward, the indexing of the taximeter’s ‘calculative space’ to fares that are controlled and regulated by local authorities also brings in elements of *industrial* and *civic* forms of worth. The device compels hackney carriage drivers to charge the meter fare set by their own council,

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<sup>30</sup> Originally invented in 1891 by Friedrich Wilhelm Gustav Bruhn in Germany, the taximeter was built into the first gasoline-powered taxi in the UK, introduced in London by Gottlieb Daimler in 1897 (English, 2012). Due to its capacity to straightforwardly calculate the legally regulated fare, it quickly became a standard feature of hackney carriages, and later of private hire vehicles, in which case it was configured to match the rates set individually by private hire operators. However, despite its widespread usage, design and operating conditions attached to the instrument were not formally codified on a national level until more than a century later, through *The Measuring Instruments (Taximeters) Regulations 2006*.



even when carrying passengers across county lines. Moreover, it bars them from working on the Uber app<sup>31</sup> when the fares offered happen to exceed the meter rate for that distance, as is sometimes the case when lucrative ‘surge’ prices apply.

On the contrary, the manner in which the Uber app relates buyers and sellers in a transaction more closely resembles the enactment of *market* relations. As a market device, the Uber app stands outside of, and in contrast to, codification via investments in form in the *industrial* world. As noted earlier, such investments are geared towards the spatiotemporal extension of *functional efficacy*, and generate stability across several dimensions of a given domain of activity: hailing a black cab in London will mean that you will enter a standardised vehicle, pay the meter fare set by TfL, and be driven by someone who has passed the Knowledge of London. The role of the taxi meter as market device becomes subsumed *within* this larger framework of codification, which is underpinned primarily by an *industrial* form of coordination. In a ‘pure’ enactment of market relations, however, both the valuation of a cab ride and the expectations tied to it should be subject solely to the desires of the buyers who seek it at a given moment in time; there is no need, therefore, to value prolonged investments in form aligned with the *industrial* order, like those underpinning the ‘purpose-built’ black cab or the Knowledge of London, in and of themselves. If they do happen to be valued by someone, then that valuation is relegated to the status of a mere ‘private good’ that has no bearing on market relations, which are ‘atemporal by nature’ (Boltanski and Thévenot, 2006, p. 194). Despite the codification of a number of qualitative controls by the *Local Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 1976*, the absence of price regulation has meant that this market-based configuration of relations has historically been a feature of the private hire sector. However, it has been markedly strengthened

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<sup>31</sup> This inability only applies to the area governed by the drivers’ own licensing authority; hackney drivers have been known to undertake private hire work on Uber across county lines. Perhaps the most famous case of this was hackney carriages in Berwick-upon-Tweed working on the Uber app further south in Newcastle upon Tyne, which led to the court case ‘Newcastle City Council v Berwick-upon-Tweed Borough Council’ (2008).

by the rise of the Uber app, a market device that introduced, for the first time, the calculation of taxi fares based on real-time data collection on demand and supply (Rosenblat, 2018).

While the *market* world is marked by a fragmented, transaction-based form of temporality, as alluded to above, there are no limitations to the space over which the interaction of buyers and sellers may extend in this world. This is why the offering of the Uber app has been introduced in markets around the world, and is now available in over 10,000 cities worldwide (Uber, 2020). And it is also why the rapid rise in PHV licensing and the concurrent rise of ‘cross-border hire’ are, far from being scandalous developments, crucial components of Uber’s formula for success. An Uber ride may, in theory, be booked at any time of day or night, in any of these cities, and an Uber driver may accept a job wherever they can. In practice, however, there may be certain limitations to this ideal form, for example the state of internet connectivity, the adequate availability of drivers in a specific area, or indeed Uber’s own ‘geo-fencing’ restrictions (Uber, 2018b). We will examine later how the Uber app’s ‘surge’ and ‘dynamic pricing’ mechanisms attempt to calculate a price that not only matches demand with supply at a given moment in time, but also artificially engineers the supply side by offering greater fares to drivers, thus enticing them to drive into a specific area where demand momentarily outstrips supply (Rosenblat, 2018). The effectiveness of the latter strategy depends on Uber drivers’ ability to accept jobs anywhere they can, which, as we saw earlier, is connected with the contentious practice of cross-border hire.

Both these mechanisms may be understood as operations of the Uber app as market device, which enables access to a codified form of algorithmic functions aimed at ensuring the facilitation of transactions between Uber as a service provider<sup>32</sup> and customers seeking out an affordable, convenient mode of transportation. Through these mechanisms, the worth that may be acquired by Uber drivers becomes attached to the fluctuating value and spatiotemporal spread

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<sup>32</sup> However, as will become clear in a forthcoming empirical chapter on the *market* world, ethnographic findings cast doubt on the extent to which these algorithmic mechanisms facilitate Uber drivers’ ability to engage in transactions that they *themselves* deem satisfactory.

of the desired service that they provide: the ‘great’ Uber driver is one who is *attuned* to market rhythms; is opportunistic in reading and responding to the desires of Uber users, as represented by the app; seeks out lucrative transactions<sup>33</sup> that increase their worth; and exercises control over emotions in the conduct of those transactions, so as to not jeopardise them. Every instance of evaluating and accepting a job on the Uber app ‘formats the dispositions and skills’ (McFall, 2009, p. 279) of Uber drivers *in line with* these ideals. And whenever they find themselves doing such a job, they also abide by another key virtue from the *market* order: the requirement to pay *attention to others*, even if this attention takes a form that is ‘consubstantial’ with *selfishness* in the pursuit of worth (Boltanski and Thévenot, 2006, p. 200). Two key variants of this attention will be examined in tandem with ethnographic findings in the forthcoming empirical chapters; a state of alertness to various indicators of ‘surge’ pricing, like heavy rain, snowfall, football games, concerts, festivals, and so forth; and emotional labour performed in return for a good rating that, above all else, ensures continued access to the platform (Hochschild, 1983; Rosenblat and Stark, 2016; Gandini, 2019). The latter of these is interrogated in terms of the *connexionist* order, to which I turn to next.

### ***The Connexionist World: Mediation through the Platform Model***

First outlined by Boltanski and Chiapello in *The New Spirit of Capitalism* (2005), the *connexionist* [or ‘projective’] order of worth forms the basis of their argument that current tendencies in the spirit of capitalism – its present-day critical foundations – cannot be reduced ‘solely to the extension of market justifications’ (p. 92). Associated with a reorganisation of capitalist firms from the 1980s onward and the ideals and justifications that have underpinned this shift, this order is oriented towards the common good of *mediation*, denoting the ephemeral,

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<sup>33</sup> Such transactions have both financial and logistic components, with the latter pertaining to the route taken to fulfill a particular booking, the chances of getting another booking near the destination, and the possibility of any ‘dead miles’ [i.e., driven without a passenger] cutting into profit margins.

reactivable enrolment of diverse beings<sup>34</sup> into a *network* [or ‘reticular’] form of organisation. A *project* is an occasion for the momentary spatiotemporal constitution, or ‘gelling’ (White, 1995; Sheller, 2004), of network forms: a temporary stabilisation of *connections* that enables the achievement of equivalence among beings and convergence on shared judgements in line with the polity model. The latter are premised on the higher common principle of *activity* that blurs the line between the ‘personal’ and ‘professional’ domains of life, and which is evaluated in terms of the number and reach of connections accumulated over a succession of projects. Since all projects must necessarily come to an end, the connections encountered in a given project constitute a test of one’s ability to exploit them, to transform them into a pathway to another project (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005, p. 75).

My engagement with the *connexionist* order focuses upon three interrelated aspects of the controversy surrounding Uber’s rise, which I shall discuss separately for reasons of clarity. The first of these pertains to the direct, foundational linkages between the intrinsic value placed in the *connexionist* order on any form of *mediation*, and the operations of Uber and other large app-based service providers that together make up the ‘gig economy’. I dissect these more closely in conjunction with work in digital sociology on the *platform* as a distinct form of capitalist business organisation (Srnicek, 2016; Vallas and Schor, 2020; Gregory, 2021; Stark and Pais, 2020), and, relatedly, work in STS on ‘rentiership’ in Big Tech (Birch, 2020; Birch and Cochrane, 2022). Second, I explore continuities between certain features of the *connexionist* world and Uber’s longstanding framing of its drivers as entrepreneurial, self-employed ‘partners’ who qualify as independent contractors rather than as workers, and juxtapose this with some features of the relations constituting the socio-material work environment inhabited by the drivers themselves, which is marked by *both* continuities and discontinuities with this form of coordination; as noted

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<sup>34</sup> Consistent with the relational ontological stance outlined in the previous chapter, I use ‘beings’ here as a generic referent for both human and non-human actants.

in the previous chapter, some of its features are very closely aligned with the *market* order of worth. Exploring this interesting divergence between the discourse or rhetoric mobilised by the company on one end, and the actual, socio-material working conditions faced by the drivers who provide its service on the other, also speaks to previous work which suggests that platforms' framing of gig workers, sometimes also featuring in the marketing of their service offering, can be understood as a discursive strategy to win their 'consent' over working conditions – whether from a Gramscian, Foucauldian, or labour process perspective (Moisander et al., 2018; Gandini, 2019; Galière, 2020; Purcell and Brook, 2022; Cameron, 2023; Schor et al., 2024). The extent to which this was found to be the case is an empirical matter that will be addressed in a later chapter on findings relating to the *connexionist* order.

Perhaps the closest manifestation of business organisation founded on the activity of mediation itself, the 'platform' denotes a new category of firm that, by providing digital infrastructure, positions itself 'between users...*as the ground upon which their activities occur*' (Srnicek, 2016, p. 24; emphasis added). A range of notable technological companies, including Uber, Deliveroo, Airbnb, Amazon, Facebook, among others, have self-identified as platforms and meet the above definition of this category, which rapidly gained recognition in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crash. As a number of scholars have previously noted, this period was marked by 'surplus', unemployed populations with minimal recourse to welfare state protections on one end, and 'speculative' capital seeking high returns in a low interest environment on the other, two contextual factors which combined to facilitate the emergence and rapid growth of digital platform businesses, like the ones mentioned above (Rajan, 2006, p. 111; Srnicek, 2016, p. 38). The imperative behind platforms' offering of digital infrastructures is twofold: to extract economic rents from users accessing those infrastructures, with these users sometimes also encompassing *other platforms themselves*, as is the case for Amazon AWS cloud computing services; and to record and collect data, which is generated via user engagement and constitutes the raw material

to be processed, analysed, and then redeployed in business decisions, and/or monetised through sales to other businesses.

This orientation towards the extraction of rents and data relies on the setting in motion of ‘network effects’ – a continual cycle whereby current users ‘beget more users’ (Srnicek, 2016, p. 25), in turn leading to a strong tendency towards monopolisation (Morozov, 2015). The more a platform moves towards a monopolistic [or oligopolistic] standing, the more this turns into a necessity for survival: a key metric based on which platforms compete with one another, and acquire higher market valuations that can unlock further cheap borrowing (Galloway, 2018), is the number of users who regularly use/subscribe to them and the data extracted from those users. Consequently, not only do many of these firms offer their digital infrastructures [e.g., the Uber app] free of cost, but also subsidise the costs of any services offered via that infrastructure, so as to keep prices down and attract even more users. Uber’s past subsidisation of prices to draw in more riders, and fares to recruit more drivers, is a case in point of the latter (Lawrence, 2022; Schor et al., 2023).

Another important feature of the platform as a capitalist form is its paring down of assets besides the core ownership of software [code/algorithms; data analytics] and in some cases hardware [servers; data centres]. The specific variant of platform that Uber most closely resembles is the ‘lean’ platform (Srnicek, 2016), marked by the following features: a bare minimum of assets, most importantly software and data analytics; outsourcing of labour, investment and other costs onto the workers who provide its service offering; structuring the drivers’ wages on a ‘gig’ or piece work basis; price/fare subsidisation, which is funded by a surplus of ‘speculative capital’, in particular hedge funds and mutual funds (Srnicek, 2016, p. 38; Rajan, 2006); and, most importantly, extracting regular rents and data from drivers’ and riders’ access to the digital infrastructure of the Uber app.

Recent work in STS has examined how rents, rather than naturally following from the design of software itself, are *created* through a broader process that reconfigures ‘the inter-relation between the legal, technical and political-economic’ dimensions of social ordering in favour of the corporate collective of ‘Big Tech’ – a process that scholars argue qualifies as a distinct, technology-focused form of ‘rentiership’ (Birch and Cochrane, 2022). The emergence of this variant of rentiership, and its subsequent rise as the dominant ‘techno-economic means’ of present-day capitalism (Birch, 2020), can be said to involve at least three different forms of codification. The first of these is the conversion of software underpinning the firm’s offering of digital infrastructure *into an asset* from which rents and data can be legally extracted [‘assetization’], achieved via amendments to national and international frameworks for research and development [R&D] and intellectual property rights (Birch, 2017a; 2017b; 2020). The second form is that of ‘capitalization’, which refers to the deployment of tools, procedures and financial services expertise in order to translate future returns on investment into present-day terms (Muniesa et al., 2017); it is this operation that creates the conditions of possibility for large inflows of speculative capital into digital platform businesses – capital that funds the subsidisation of different user groups in order to set network effects into play, with an expectation of extracting ‘monopoly rents’ at a later date (Birch, 2020; Birch and Cochrane, 2022). Such expectations have a *performative* character, as was exhibited for example by billion dollar rises in Uber and Lyft’s share prices after the Proposition 22 vote in California in 2020, to continue classifying platform-affiliated drivers as independent contractors, succeeded with 58% of the vote (Hussain et al., 2020; Mohamed, 2020; Dubal, 2022; O’Connell, 2023). This vote had been preceded by the second-most expensive campaign in the state’s history, with \$205.3m spent in favour of the measure, compared to a mere \$18.8m against (*Ballotpedia*, 2020). Finally, there is the technical codification of the nature of sociality (Marres and Stark, 2020; Stark and Pais, 2020), and from the standpoint of the polity model, the ordering of worth that is *inscribed into* the design of algorithmic functions that rank and classify platform users and workers. For example, who counts

as a good, trustworthy Uber driver? What should happen to a driver who has fallen below a certain rating threshold, or whose cancellation rate is too high? Does it matter that this driver had maintained a high rating on the platform for many years, or that the fall below the threshold was triggered by only one or two individual ratings? Questions like these will be considered in tandem with examination of ethnographic data in Part V of the thesis.

The aforementioned qualities of platforms relate to the *connexionist* order of worth in several ways. Whereas the recruitment of more users via network effects and subsidisation is consistent with the common good of advancing *mediation*, the strategy of paring down assets in order to lighten business operations and make them more agile affirms another feature of the same order: that of *availability* to pursue any new project that may come up, facilitated by temporary, adjustable access to any assets required for the current one (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005). In an ideal enactment of *connexionist* relations, ensuring availability through letting go of ‘durable’ material ownership simultaneously furthers the only form of true, lasting ownership: that of oneself, as a dynamic vector of connections (p. 101). An example of how availability is pursued by platforms can be observed in their hosting of digital infrastructures on servers owned by other, ‘cloud provider’ platforms like Amazon AWS: as Srnicek (2016) says, part of Uber’s impressive growth is owed to the fact that ‘it does not need to build new factories – *it just needs to rent more servers*’ (p. 25; emphasis added). Likewise, on the operational front, it also does not need to own any cars, or formally employ any drivers – it just needs to onboard more ‘partner-drivers’, whose labour and vehicles can be accessed on an ‘on-demand’, ‘reactivable’ basis. This form of outsourcing has previously been criticised by scholars as being akin to a ‘co-opting’ of assets not in possession of the platform itself (Stark and Pais, 2020, p. 51; Watkins and Stark, 2018). However, assuming the standpoint of the company itself, one may recast this ‘co-opting’ as an ephemeral, reactivatable ‘enrolment’ (Callon and Latour, 1981; Latour, 1987) into a network form that best facilitates the enactment of ‘real-time’ mediation between drivers and riders, in



which case it would be deemed desirable in the *connexionist* world. A similar form of legitimization may be inferred for the strategy of rentiership: even if it might hinder transactions between independent buyers and sellers *on their own terms*, as is the ideal in the *market* world, it nevertheless is a necessary means of sustaining digital platforms that make *more* mediation possible, over greater distances, in real-time.

Linkages between the *connexionist* order and Uber's operations start to become more complicated, however, once we begin to switch from the standpoint of Uber as a company to that of the drivers who provide its service. It is apposite to start this transition by first discussing, and setting up a frame of reference to, how Uber *itself* frames its drivers. Calling them 'partner-drivers', one of the company's longtime recruiting slogans has been 'Be Your Own Boss'. Scholars have noted that Uber, founded in 2009, did not invent this slogan<sup>35</sup>, whose mobilisation forms part of the discursive dimension of a broader historical current towards casualised labour in the United States – a current that had *already* significantly affected the organisation of the country's taxicab trade (Minchin, 2020, p. 56). Relatedly, prior ethnographic research has shown that the same slogan also orients how 'traditional', non-platform taxi drivers perceive their work activity (Luedke, 2010; Occhiuto, 2017; see also Gambetta and Hamil, 2005). If that is the case, then what is different about the way Uber mobilises this slogan? Part of the answer lies in its co-articulation with the term 'platform', which embodies a relatively new 'populist ethos' through its connotations of technology-enabled flatness, accessibility, and egalitarianism (Gillespie, 2010, p. 351). And part of it may be related to the platform model's strong associations with the *connexionist* order of worth (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005), as indicated in this section. So whereas Uber has indeed benefitted from a longer trend towards an erosion of worker rights and solidarities and the accompanying solidification of independent-contractor status in the taxicab trade (Dubal, 2017;

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<sup>35</sup> Pioneered in the first instance by FedEx (Minchin, 2020), this slogan is now a marketing tagline for not just Uber but also other platform companies, for example Deliveroo (Gregory, 2021).

Thelen, 2018; Minchin, 2020), the manner in which it frames as well as manages its ‘partner-drivers’ takes these tendencies even further, whilst at the same time legitimating them in terms of certain *connexionist* maxims: *mediation* that is valued in and of itself; *activity* aimed at advancing mediation, and which blurs the distinction between ‘work’ and ‘non-work’; *flexibility* to switch between different projects; and *personability* in relations with other beings (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005).

Yet do these maxims also translate into, and resemble, the manner in which the socio-material work environment of Uber drivers is organised? Or, equally, with how those drivers *themselves* perceive and experience that work environment? At first glance, it may appear that several characteristics of Uber driving are indeed consistent with a *connexionist* form of coordination. The structure of an Uber driver’s workday is contingent upon, and changes with, people requesting rides through a few quick touches on their smartphones, an embodied gesture that immediately sends a request or ‘ping’ to drivers in the vicinity. Each instance of the driver accepting a request, and thereby ‘matching’ with a rider, may be seen as an enactment of *mediation* between the two parties, mediation that has been facilitated by the Uber platform and in which the driver partakes – thereby acquiring worth in the *connexionist* world. It may be argued that hackney carriage drivers picking up passengers hailing them on the street, or traditional PHV drivers accepting trips booked with their operator, are also partaking in mediation. That is indeed the case, but what makes those situations less worthy in terms of the *connexionist* order is that those drivers do not enrol into the expansive *network* of the Uber platform, which allows anyone among an extensive workforce of ‘partner-drivers’ to connect with anyone among millions of app users, and whose ability to compress time [on-demand, real-time booking requests] and space [wherever there is internet and a presence of Uber drivers] is unparalleled.

Relatedly, Uber drivers' everyday management of shifting, uncertain work patterns, which are contingent upon the innumerable permutations that are possible within this network, may be seen as desirable in terms of the virtues of *activity* and *flexibility*. A driver may accept as many requests as they can while staying under a 10-hour cap<sup>36</sup> on 'driving time' (Uber, 2018), which, owing to wait times between jobs, can translate into a significantly longer duration during which drivers can be 'online' [available] on the app. And they may accept rides at any time of day or night, going to different places, and with different kinds of routes. As with taxicab driving in general, each of these rides may make for a different kind of social interaction, and this variety may be said to be intensified owing to the expansive network of the Uber platform. However, what is different about these interactions in the work relations of Uber driving is that drivers are faced with a requirement to uphold the virtue of *personability* in the *connexionist* order. This requirement is encoded into Uber's evaluative system of ratings, which encourages an Uber driver to 'be even tempered, self-assured without being arrogant, familiar without overstepping the limits<sup>37</sup>, obliging, with more to offer than he expects in return...to give answers that are to the point, *to echo people*, to ask good questions' (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005, p. 80; emphasis added). I will examine the problematic aspects of emotional labour and information asymmetries involved in ensuring this form of personability in my discussion of ethnographic findings relating to the *connexionist* order, but for now it suffices to say that the ratings system – which requires Uber drivers to remain above a certain threshold that varies by area but is usually quite high (Rosenblat, 2018) – serves as a 'mechanism of justice' that is consistent with this order. This mechanism allows that those who fail to uphold the virtue of being personable, in order to satisfactorily advance the common good of mediation, may be *cut off* from the network they are

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<sup>36</sup> This is the limit applicable in the United Kingdom. It varies in other regions, for example it is 12 hours within a 72 hour timespan in Hong Kong (Uber, 2023).

<sup>37</sup> An illustration of this can be found in riders posting accounts of interesting interactions with Uber drivers online, many of which have gone viral over the past few years – see for example this collection of tweets on the online memes forum *Cheezburger*: <https://cheezburger.com/7421957/your-hilarious-uber-tweets-have-arrived> (*Cheezburger*, n.d.).

enrolled in, with the means of exacting this form of justice relying on predictive, reputational indicators (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005, p. 87).

The aforementioned continuities between the work environment of Uber drivers and the *connexionist* order begin to unravel, however, once we consider how the virtues seen to be individually affirmed form part of a broader, holistic framework [‘regime’] of justification in the *connexionist* world. To begin with, each worthy being in this world – whilst facing the contingency of wider network forms that exceed their individual self – ought to have the ability to accumulate ‘information capital’: knowledge, skills and resources derived from connections currently enrolled in, and which will spur new connections in due course. It is through a combination of ‘information capital’ and ‘social capital’ – the latter gained from the personal nature of connections that can be tapped into even after a given project ends – that the ‘great man’ in the *connexionist* world is able to move flexibly from one project to another, thereby removing the need for ‘being attached to an occupation or clinging to a qualification’ (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005, p. 79). So a key test for Uber drivers’ work environment being consistent with a *connexionist* form of coordination is whether or not it enables them to acquire information and social capital, and as a result, open up new projects that may be considered different from the current one.

Whether or not this test is met will be addressed in a later chapter, in conjunction with what I learned from full-time Uber drivers in the course of ethnographic fieldwork. It is helpful to note however that a number of scholars have already established that Uber drivers, as well as other platform workers, are *not* able to acquire information which would give them more control over their enrolment in the wider network (Rosenblat, 2018; Gregory, 2021). This enrolment is mediated by algorithmic functions whose exact technical and normative/optimizing specifications are ‘black-boxed’ – known only to company management (Pasquale, 2015). Regardless of how long they have been working on the platform, an Uber driver cannot acquire specific knowledge of the criteria underpinning how they are ‘matched’ with riders, the pricing of

fares, the rate at which rent [commission] is charged by the platform, as well as other management decisions like suspensions/deactivations spurred by low ratings (Rosenblat and Stark, 2016; Rosenblat, 2018). It is true that this black-boxing leads platform workers towards forming their own subjective understandings of how the algorithm works (Gregory, 2021, pp. 326–27), and that these understandings derive from *personal experience*, which is supposed to be valued in the *connexionist* world. Nonetheless, the asymmetrical manner in which ‘information capital’ is *permanently withheld* by platforms – no platform worker can work their way towards acquiring it – remains a core contradiction that inhibits the alignment of Uber drivers’ work activity with the *connexionist* order of worth<sup>38</sup>. And when the extraction of rents and data is also taken into account, it becomes clear that these drivers are enrolled into a relation with Uber that is unequal, one whereby the company holds the power of ‘obtaining information without reciprocation’, thus deriving ‘an advantage that is *unwarranted* in terms of the projective city’s values’ (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005, pp. 88–89; emphasis added).

The second core contradiction that can be observed in the socio-material work environment of Uber drivers pertains, in large measure, to its structuration of temporality, and is usefully exhibited through a consideration of Uber’s ratings system. I posited earlier that the contingency of Uber drivers’ schedules upon enactments of *mediation* via the Uber app affirms the *connexionist* virtues of *activity* and *flexibility*, while the platform’s ratings system encourages them to uphold the virtue of *personability*. However, all these virtues are significantly undercut by the manner in which work is structured via the Uber app as a *market device*. Not only does this device enact a strict separation between the service of Uber and the drivers who provide it, thus reducing them to ‘subjects [who] are as *available* as goods on the *market*’ (Boltanski and Thévenot, 2006, p. 200; emphasis in original), it also generates what I earlier described as a

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<sup>38</sup> This may also be seen as a contradiction with the *market* world, where both buyers and sellers ought to have *transparency* with respect to information relevant to the transaction (Boltanski and Thévenot, 2006).

‘fractured’ temporality – one where time is divided up into successive *transactions*, with no continuity between them. The latter is further reinforced by the terms and conditions that ‘partner-drivers’ agree to with Uber, as well as the design of the Uber app itself, both of which bar them from ever contacting individual customers again (see *Uber B.V.*, 2015). If Uber drivers had not been constrained by this fragmented, market-based temporality, not only would their personal qualities be able to visibly transform the identity of the service they provide, but they would also have the ability to cultivate relationships with others in the network [riders, fellow drivers] over ‘a period of time that is relatively short, *but allows for the construction of more enduring links that will be put on hold while remaining available*’ (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005, pp. 75, 89; emphasis added). With neither of these imperatives being met, the normative, teleological orientation that is supposed to underpin drivers’ *personability* – that is, the promise of new connections which will augment their ‘social capital’ – is also lost, thereby denying them worth in line with the *connexionist* order.

In summary, then, whereas Uber’s operations do make it a worthy being in this order, the manner in which it frames its drivers – which primarily draws on virtues from the same order – does *not* translate easily into the socio-material work environment that those drivers have to inhabit, which, as I have indicated already and will continue discussing in later chapters, leans more towards a *market* form of coordination. Taken together, the divergences identified in this section also serve as a reminder that Boltanski and Chiapello (2005) outline of a framework of *connexionist* relations is, ultimately, an instructive one, and the extent to which lay and business enactments of this order approximate their nascent outline may not be as high as it is in the case of the much older, relatively better recognised *industrial* and *market* orders. This was found to be true at least in the context of Uber driving, where some features of their framework were being disregarded altogether in the way Uber managed its drivers, while others remained key to

understanding its operations, its discursive strategies, as well as how Uber drivers themselves understood and evaluated some aspects of their work relations.

### 3.3. Second Plane: Figurations

The second plane on which the controversy around Uber's rise and resulting shifts in the economic ordering of the taxicab trade played out pertains to a battle for power resources and status, where actors actively positioned themselves in relation to other actors and enacted group boundaries in the process, and where there was no striving for equivalence in terms of higher principles of worth. It is approached primarily through Elias and Scotson's (1994) model of established-outsider relations, as developed in their empirical study of figurational conflict in a small English village which they referred to as Winston Parva<sup>39</sup>. I had first read *The Established and the Outsiders* years before embarking on my PhD fieldwork, and some of what I discovered happened to map almost perfectly onto a number of interrelated elements of it, leading me to engage with more scholarly work on this analytical framework. These findings, taken up for analysis later in the thesis, centred on implicit and explicit denunciations of other actors based on their membership of a social group, sometimes coded by race or ethnicity, at other times by markers like length of residence in the UK, generational status, the sector of the taxicab trade they work in, etc. The last of these provides an instance of a slippage from the first realm of moral conflict over different orders of worth, in that actors enrolled in, and seen as perpetuating, a *market-connexionist* 'taxi world' were denounced on two levels: based on their association with an ordering of economic relations deemed illegitimate; and based on who they were, in terms of their membership of a social group cast as different, and inferior, vis-à-vis other groups. The framework of established-outsider relations shines a light on the second kind of critique.

To understand such critiques, it is necessary to foreground the arena of sociality referred to as 'community relations'. All participants recruited in this study belonged to particular communities, with 'communities' here denoting places of residence/neighbourhoods and the myriad networks of relationships – economic *and* non-economic – that compose them (Elias and

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<sup>39</sup> The area in question is located just outside of Leicester city centre (Stanley, 2017).



Scotson, 1994, p. 146). Each such community involves webs of interdependence among social groups which are ‘established’ in terms of length of residence, internal cohesion and access to material and symbolic power resources, and contrariwise, those marked as ‘outsiders’ or ‘newcomers’. The exact form taken by such interdependence in a given residential setting, the tensions borne of this, and the manner in which they come to implicate members of both kinds of groups, form the focus of the lens of figural sociology (Elias, 1978, p. 131; 1990; Stanley, 2017). A ‘figuration’ may be composed by any social groups who ‘establish some kind of link fostered by the dependencies they have on one another, and which render them capable of exercising some form of *reciprocal constraint*’ (Quintaneiro, 2004; emphasis added). Such reciprocal constraint is usually asymmetrical in nature, and it entails means of restriction and enablement/support at the same time (Dunning and Hughes, 2023). The concept of figurations may be employed to investigate a range of interdependence networks that may ‘possess one or many levels of integration, high or low power differentials, and large or small number of participants, whom, in turn, may also belong to other [figurations] where they may exercise different roles’ (Quintaneiro, 2004). We will examine later how ethnographic data collected in this study led to the discernment of a figuration that, whilst existing on a local scale, was *multi-scalar* in nature, and another which was indicative of a three-way constellation, in that the fallout of tensions between two groups in an older figuration [White English and British Asians] came to overshadow those between one of them and another, more recent outsider group [British Asians and ‘newer’ Asians].

### ***The Eliasian Framework of Established-Outsider Relations***

Let us now delve into certain salient elements of Elias and Scotson’s (1994) framework of figural relations that will be engaged with in this thesis. Presented as an ‘empirical paradigm’ geared towards discerning and isolating some ‘structural regularities’ of figurations by investigating them on a small, clearly delimited scale (p. x), their account begins by taking note

of a phenomenon often observed in societies across the world: members of certain established groups thinking of themselves as ‘in all respects’ superior to certain other, outsider groups, including in human, ‘by nature’ terms (Stanley, 2017), and, concomitantly, a constant torrent of humiliation and abuse directed towards those marked as outsiders. The problem grows more intricate when this belief in the superiority and virtue of the established is to varying extents internalised by the outsiders, who find that their exclusion and stigmatisation comes to make themselves *feel* inferior – not just in terms of their lack of power resources but also ‘by nature’ (Elias and Scotson, 1994, p. 159).

Tensions of this kind arise in the first instance because the self-image of individuals inevitably draws on their membership of a social group: ‘A person’s we-image and we-ideal form as much part<sup>40</sup> of a person’s self-image and self-ideal as the image and ideal of him-or herself as the unique person to which he or she refers as “I”’. It is not difficult to see that statements such as “I, Pat O’Brien, am an Irishman” implies an I-image as well as a we-image’ (Elias and Scotson, 1994, p. xliii). And they arise in the second instance because identification with an established group goes hand in hand with linkages of an interdependent kind with members of outsider groups, such that there is no escape from them. One need only imagine the hypothetical scenario, relevant to this study, of immigrant or ethnic minority taxicab drivers suddenly disappearing from view: would Britain’s night-time economy still be the same? Doing so helps illustrate how someone who might resent their presence has no choice but to encounter them again and again; in fact, it is hard to fathom how their resentment could persist otherwise. The aspect of interdependence and the exercise of reciprocal constraint that goes with it is, put simply, crucial; as Elias and Scotson said of the established and outsider groups they studied in Winston Parva, the nature of their relationship was such that they were ‘locked inescapably in the

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<sup>40</sup> Elias’ later work on the ‘we-I balance’ (1991) took a more nuanced view, whereby identification with a group could affect the individual’s self-image to a greater or lesser degree.

interdependence of their neighbourhood...*They had a tendency to reproduce themselves and each other*' (1994, p. 145; emphasis added).

As Stanley (2017) has previously noted, perhaps the foremost question raised by Elias regarding the phenomenon alluded to above was: '*How is it done?* How do members of the [established] group maintain among themselves the belief that they are not merely more powerful *but also better human beings than those of another?*' (Elias and Scotson, 1994, p. xvi; emphasis added). His answer, based on the findings of the Winston Parva study, went beyond the 'usual explanations' for disparities in power and status, like those focused on class and race, instead foregrounding three interrelated resources of power through which such disparities are sustained over time: a high degree of integration or 'internal cohesion' within established groups; access to material power resources; and symbolic power resources, which uphold an 'idealised we-image' (p. li). Taken together, these resources are constitutive of a group's *power ratio* – a term that emphasises the relational, poly-directional and processual character of shifts in power between interdependent groups (Dunning and Hughes, 2023, p. 80; Elias and Scotson, 1994). Their distinct-yet-relational operation could be clearly discerned because the two groups in Winston Parva [the 'villagers' and the 'Estate people'] were both White working class; the only difference between them was that one was 'old' whereas the other was 'new', and as Elias and Scotson were to find, this had profound implications.

When recast as a sociological rather than a merely statistical category, 'oldness' had the effect of producing *internal cohesion* – the development and observance of norms specific to a certain group, which reinforced a degree of self-restraint in the behaviour and conduct of its members (Elias and Scotson, 1994, p. xviii). By subjecting their behaviour to 'specific patterns of affect control' (p. xxiii), it worked to push their 'we-I balance' in the direction of their 'we-image' (Elias, 1991). Relatedly, it was also an indicator of the accumulation and relative monopolisation of *material resources*, such as representation in local government and work opportunities in both

the public and private sectors. These two factors – internal cohesion and power superiority in material terms – set the stage for claims to the higher *status* of one’s group in human, ‘by nature’ terms, which act as a means of power of a symbolic kind (Stanley, 2017). In Winston Parva, the influx of outsiders was experienced by the established as a threat to all three of these resources, with the response being a constant exclusion of the outsiders from any kind of informal social contact and the casting of stigmatising slurs on them – both of which initially befuddled many of those outsiders themselves.

It is the aspect of stigmatisation in established-outsider relations – an *affective* battle that mainly pertains to what is referred to as ‘symbolic violence’ but is always underpinned by power differentials of other kinds [length of residence; internal cohesion; material resources] – that proved to be especially relevant to the findings of this research. Elias dissected this in terms of the complementary dynamics of ‘group charisma’ and ‘group disgrace’, which will be central to the analysis of figural relations presented in a later chapter of the thesis. Underlying these dynamics is an ‘optical illusion’, sustained by way of disparities in power, which Elias and Scotson described as follows:

“As the study of Winston Parva indicates, an established group tends to attribute to its outsider group as a whole the “bad” characteristics of that group’s “worst” section—of its anomic minority. In contrast, the self-image of the established group tends to be modelled on its exemplary, most “nomic” or norm-setting section, on the minority of its “best” members. This *pars pro toto* distortion in opposite directions enables an established group to prove their point to themselves as well as to others; there is always some evidence to show that one’s group is “good” and the other is “bad”.”

— Elias and Scotson (1994, p. xix; emphasis in original)

As the passage above indicates, an uneven balance of power between different groups bound up in a figuration comes to be reflected in a discrepancy between their ‘we-images’, with this in turn

affecting their members' own, individual self-image. The notion of *group charisma* captures how members of established groups are able to lay claim to higher self-worth in human, 'by nature' terms by drawing it from an 'idealised we-image' – one based on the 'minority of the best' within their group. This charisma may be invoked by *all* members – even those at the lowest rungs of the group's internal status ordering (Elias and Scotson, 1994, p. 104) – as long as they are seen to not overtly violate group-specific norms, such as avoiding informal contact with, or partaking in the denigration of, the outsiders/newcomers. It is always coupled with, and is co-dependent on, the mobilisation of *group disgrace* against the outsiders – a wholesale attachment of negative, stigmatising attributes that in practice are found in only a few members of their group, but which 'can be made to stick' (p. xx) nonetheless because a lack of internal cohesion and material-symbolic resources means that they are unable to 'hit back' (p. 102; Elias, 1998). Often embodied in dehumanising and humiliating slurs and code words, the degree to which the 'sting' of such collective disgrace continues to be felt by members of the outsider group is an indicator, albeit a belated one, of shifts in the balance of power (Stanley, 2017). In Winston Parva, for instance, the actions of only a small number of unruly youngsters from a street disparagingly referred to as 'rat alley' decisively influenced the image of everyone living on the Estate. Likewise, we will discuss later how the actions of a few British Asians found guilty of sexual offenses in the grooming gangs scandal resulted in a peculiar form of collective disgrace being attached to *all* Asian men, including taxicab drivers.

It is important to underline that group charisma and group disgrace are, in essence, processes of an *affective* nature. Collective memories of prosperity and prestige enjoyed by the established, or those of humiliation and abuse suffered by the outsiders as a result of the slurs cast on them, can leave a lasting impact on the self-image of members of both kinds of groups – one that sometimes endures *well beyond* any shifts in their 'figurational positioning', as measured by the current state of power ratios. The aspect of collective memories, and how they live on through their embodiment in oral narratives, the teaching of history, TV productions, ceremonies,

memorabilia, old buildings, names of streets and places and so forth, plays a crucial role in the delineation of figurational boundaries and corresponding battle lines in affective terms. Since the newcomers do not share them, their very presence can be experienced as a ‘irritant or affront’ (Stanley, 2017, para. 2.19), thus potentially fuelling a heightening of tensions and an intensification of dehumanising attacks. On the other end, as Elias notes: ‘Often enough the very names of groups in an outsider situation carry with them, *even for the ears of their own members*, undertones [and overtones] of inferiority and disgrace’ (Elias and Scotson, 1994, p. xxiv; emphasis added). Whereas he described this in terms of a ‘deep anchorage in the personality structure’ of individuals belonging to both kinds of groups (p. 103), it is understood here in terms of a sedimentation of affective flows in virtual memory (Massumi, 2002; Swanton, 2010a) in line with iterations of ‘we-images’ from a time of a more uneven balance of power. Such territorialization of affective flows means that these ‘we-images’ can take on the quality of a kind of ‘second nature’ for members of the respective groups (Quintaneiro, 2004), thus making them hard to shake off.

This becomes clearer when we consider the protracted affective consequences of the decline of established groups, whereby a loss of power relative to the outsiders does not translate into an equivalent waning of the human, ‘by nature’ superiority invoked by their members. Even when their power ratio has markedly declined, members of such groups may *continue* to call on the ‘rewarding self-love’ (Elias and Scotson, 1994, p. xlv) that is ‘left over from earlier days of greatness’ (Stanley, 2017, para. 2.17) – something that acts as an affective shield that prevents them from fully reckoning with their now-weakened figurational positioning. For many generations, they may be afflicted by what Stanley calls an ‘overdeveloped we-ideal and a kind of collective illness’ (ibid.), which prevents from adjusting and recalibrating to their present situation. Elias aptly describes the paralysing impact of this as follows: ‘It is as if they were saying: *if we can’t live up to the we-image of the time of our greatness, nothing is really worth doing*’ (Elias and Scotson, 1994, p. xlvi; emphasis added). On the other end, a similar ‘carry-on’ effect may exist for group disgrace inflicted upon the outsiders: despite improvements in their

figurational positioning over time, for instance as a result of the accumulation of material resources, they may continue to feel the ‘sting’ of slurs cast on them in days past<sup>41</sup>. This is partly because it is only after power differentials of a material kind have narrowed that the battle over symbolic resources – status, prestige, self-worth in human, ‘by nature’ terms, and the ability to effectively counter the ‘stigma of social inferiority’ – really takes centre stage (Elias and Scotson, 1994, pp. xxxii, 158). In sum, then, there is a temporal lag in the evolution of the power ratios of interdependent groups and the ‘we-images’ of their members: shifts in the former may take a considerable period of time – sometimes spanning a number of generations – to be reflected in the latter. The mobilisation of group charisma and group disgrace, underpinned by these ‘we-images’, may likewise continue to correspond to power ratios that no longer exist, exerting what may be called a lingering, ‘carry-on’ effect on members of the groups concerned. Later on in the thesis, we will observe the manner in which particular iterations of this ‘carry-on’ effect were observed in accounts given by participants of this study, as well as how it came to affect their views on the shifting economic ordering of the taxicab trade.

The final aspect of Elias and Scotson’s (1994) model that was found to be relevant to the findings of this thesis pertains to the question of how racial or ethnic differences figure in established-outsider relations. Elias was unambiguously clear on his position on the matter: should one foreground such differences at the expense of power ratios between groups bonded together in a figuration, it would be akin to ‘[putting] the cart before the horse’ (Elias and Scotson, 1994, p. xlvii). Albeit recognising that power-superior and power-inferior groups are often divided along racial or ethnic lines, he contended that this was only as a consequence of a long, drawn-out process, accelerated by rapid advances in geographical mobility, which saw formerly secluded groups coming into contact with one another and then becoming interdependent, ‘as established and outsiders’ with unequal power ratios (ibid.). Since in many such cases groups on either end

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<sup>41</sup> As will be observed later, the enduring sensitivity around the slur ‘paki’ in British Asian communities provides a case in point.

of the power scale differed in racial or ethnic terms, overtly distinguishing characteristics like skin colour, language and dress steadily became markers or ‘signals’ of people’s belonging to an outsider group. Nevertheless, he was at pains to underline that tensions between those already established in a particular place and those who arrive later as newcomers are always driven by balance-of-power struggles between the two, *not* these characteristics in and of themselves.

Drawing on the findings of the Winston Parva study, he further extended this argument to encompass the mobilisation of group disgrace by the established against the outsiders, asserting that this is ‘no different’ when there are racial or ethnic differences involved as compared to when they are not (Elias and Scotson, 1994, p. xxx). Here, it was implied that such differences may *inflect* the mobilisation of group disgrace, thus directing its course along racially or ethnically segmented lines, but beyond this they have no impact on the character and force of group disgrace. Albeit this point was seemingly meant to supplement the aforementioned underlining of power differentials, it goes further in downplaying the role of racial and ethnic differences in figurational conflict; it is therefore taken as a separate argument. Both these arguments will be picked up on and clarified further in Chapter 5.4, where I revisit and then evaluate them in terms of empirical findings from my fieldwork. In order to finish laying the groundwork for discussing those findings, it is necessary to briefly outline how racial and ethnic differences are being conceptualised in this thesis. The next section takes up this task.

### ***Racialisation: A Relational, Expressive-Material View***

In addressing the aforementioned question of whether and to what degree racial and ethnic differences modulate the nature of figurational conflict, and in particular the mobilisation of group disgrace, Elias took aim at how these differences – whether in the form of physical characteristics like skin colour or cultural markers like language – are typically foregrounded in social scientific studies of relations among social groups, calling this an ‘ideological avoidance action’ owing to which a crucial focus on power differentials, and their long-term temporal



evolution, is lost (Elias and Scotson, 1994, p. xxx). However, he did not expressly engage in any discussion or critical appraisal of the onto-epistemological assumptions that underpin how race and ethnicity are *understood* in those studies; in this sense, it may be said that his own conceptualisation of these notions was left underdeveloped. This may have been partly owed to the particular context of the Winston Parva study, wherein the ‘villagers’ and the ‘Estate people’ were neither of a different race, nor of a different class background. Nonetheless, given that racial and ethnic differences were found to play a salient role in the figural conflicts discerned in this study – and that their importance was stressed by several participants themselves – it becomes incumbent to address how they are being conceptualised in this thesis.

Prior research on race and ethnicity within the social sciences comprises a particularly large and diverse body of work, such that undertaking a comprehensive review within the scope of the current chapter would be an impossible task. What can be attempted, however, is a focused review – one necessarily selective and simplifying in the sense that the observations it includes have some connection to the conceptualisation of race that is employed, and developed further, in this thesis. For many decades, there has been broad consensus in the social sciences that race is a social construct that, whilst not having any verifiable basis in biological or physical differences, comes to be enrolled in how certain populations are discursively cast in these, and other [e.g., cultural], terms (Omi and Winant, 1986; Miles, 1989; Jackson and Penrose, 1993). In interrogating the workings of this construct, a pivotal concept has been that of racialisation (Banton, 1967; Miles, 1989), which redirects attention away from racial or ethnic categories themselves and towards the *processual* dynamics of how they are reproduced and attached to populations that are ‘racialised’, with this being indelibly linked to the perpetuation of power relations. Relatedly, scholars have drawn attention to the multiple modalities of race as ‘an ideological configuration’ (Hall, 1980, p. 342) that works in tandem with interpenetrative biopolitical regimes such as [post-colonial articulations of] colonial epistemologies and juridical frameworks, policies governing migration and citizenship, educational curricula, among others

(Bhambra, 2007; Meer, 2018; Weheliye, 2020; Smith and Vasudevan, 2017); its intersectional articulations with various other markers of difference, like gender, class, ethnicity, immigration status, age, sexuality, locality and so forth (Crenshaw, 1989; Romero, 2006; 2008); and its ‘scavenger-like’ adaptiveness and resilience over time, which goes to show that ‘the algebra of race can be refigured across time and place’ (Meer and Nayak, 2015, NP15; Solomos and Back, 1996). Further to this, the injurious consequences of the ways in which different discursive articulations of race imbricate or ‘inscribe’ the materiality of bodies (Ahmed, 2000; 2004; Alexander, 2000), as well as styles of dress (Dwyer, 1999; Bhachu, 2005), have also come under scrutiny. Finally, some scholars have also examined temporal shifts in the delineation of group boundaries along racialised lines, for instance those of the English working class (Virdee, 2014) or the relatively recent, reactionary political constituency of the ‘left behind’ in post-Brexit Britain (Rhodes et al., 2019). This stream of work may be located as one step closer to a figurational approach, even if it does not inquire into the possible linkages between the varied exclusion of racialised and ethnic minorities it underlines and enduring, multi-generational power differentials between them and White English communities, especially in terms of symbolic power resources [i.e., ‘we-images’].

Broadly consistent with a *relational* ontological positioning whose constituent tenets were outlined at the beginning of the current section of the thesis [Part III], my own conceptualisation of race draws chiefly from a strand of scholarship in human geography that has built upon, yet sought to productively unsettle, prevailing modes of theorising race as a social or epistemological construct, as mentioned above. Problematising the view that the notion or category of race *in essence* pertains to the representation, signification or discursive articulation of particular groups of people (e.g., Anderson, 1991; hooks, 1992; Butler, 1993; Modood, 1997; Webster, 1997; Gilroy, 2000; 2001; Skelton, 2000; Ware and Back, 2000; Alexander, 2004), these scholars have contended that an empirically grounded focus on the materiality of race and how it partakes in everyday social interaction – in other words its *ontology* – must be given equal consideration (Saldanha, 2006; 2007; 2015; Amin, 2007; Swanton, 2010a; 2010b). While they note exceptions

to this (Jackson and Penrose, 1993; Nayak, 2003; Alexander and Knowles, 2005), the crux of their critique is that even where the embodied, biological and/or phenotypical aspects of racial differentiation are considered, primacy continues to be accorded to their mediation by images, discourses, narratives or, more fundamentally, language – for instance in accounts of the ways in which racial constructions ‘inscribe’ bodies (Ahmed, 2000). A consideration of materiality *on its own terms* is elided, owing to a political distancing from the enduring legacies of biological racism, a fear of essentialism, or implicit reassertions of the nature-culture divide – of which the opposition between race as a biological and social construct is one incarnation (Saldanha, 2006, pp. 15-16; Swanton, 2010a, p. 460). To move beyond these paralysing dilemmas, several analytical moves are proposed.

The first of these is to draw on assemblage thinking (Deleuze and Guattari, 1984; 1988; Grosz, 1994a; 1994b; Buchanan, 1997; Ingold, 2000) in contending that the dynamic, heterogenous formation of race be seen in terms of the co-articulation of expressive *and* material elements. Second, this co-articulation needs to be methodologically situated in localised, spatiotemporally specific moments of encounter. Saldanha (2006) helpfully sums up these two moves as follows:

“What are the constitutive components of race? Potentially everything, but certainly strands of DNA, phenotypical variation, discursive practices (law, media, science), artefacts such as clothes and food, and the distribution of wealth. How these are connected is entirely *immanent* to the way certain human beings behave in certain circumstances.”

– Saldanha (2006, p. 19; emphasis in original)

It is important to note that materiality in this context encompasses not just phenotypical differences between *bodies*, as indicated above, but also how *things* and *spaces* come to be enrolled into encounters where racial sorting and judgement takes place (Swanton, 2010a). Rather than acting in a stable, taxonomic manner, the form taken by these material elements is

seen as being contingent on the *machinic* connections they form with other material as well as expressive elements (Deleuze and Guattari, 1988). This means that their enrolment in moments of encounter is marked by the ‘intermixing’ of elements belonging to various categories like biological, cultural, technical, juridical, institutional etc. (Amin and Thrift, 2002a; 2002b), all of which come together in constituting ‘the site of activation of a certain relation’ with difference (Buchanan, 1997, p. 83).

Such activation involves a fundamental tension between the eventfulness and potentiality of everyday encounters (Thrift, 2000; Massumi, 2002) on one end, and the weight of certain affective responses and perceptual practices (Alcoff, 2006) that become sedimented in virtual memory (Bergson, 1988; Deleuze, 1994) on the other. Virtual memory refers to the plane of affective intensities tied to past experience that live on at a subconscious level, and whose always-partial extension or actualisation in the present encounter can ‘move thinking and judgement in some directions and not others’ (Swanton, 2010a, p. 451). However, whilst it may constrain the paths taken by racial differentiation in a given encounter, it does not determine it entirely, for the *machinic* materiality of bodies, things and spaces may still lead to a somewhat different articulation of race. The aforementioned tension, then, is key to understanding the central dynamic at work: the ways in which race is ‘formed, reformed, and deformed’ in each moment of encounter, yet tends to ‘fall into relatively stable repetitions’ in how it articulates, thus leading to some raced suspicions, resentments and judgements accumulating and becoming ‘sticky’ over time (Swanton, 2010a, pp. 459, 451). Racialisation – the pivotal concept that has always denoted how ‘[nobody] ‘has’ a race, but bodies are racialised’ (Saldanha, 2006, p. 18) – is recast in these terms.

It is in line with the analytical moves laid out above that Swanton (2010a) put forth his conceptualisation of race as a *technology of differentiation*, aspects of which I *weave into* an overall figurational lens, as reviewed earlier in the chapter. Reworking an idea originally proposed

by Sheth (2004), Swanton argued that race as a technology ‘locates and sorts human differences that are encountered as threatening or ‘unruly’ (2010a, p. 460). Myriad material and expressive elements may come to be enrolled in this process, as mentioned above, and this imbues the technology of race with an inherently creative and devious nature – so much so that across recurring yet diverse instances of differentiation, potentially everything is racialised (Amin, 2007). I will expand on my own deployment of this particular notion, and how it is integrated within a figurational lens, in a later empirical chapter on figurational relations. For now, I move towards concluding this series of chapters on theory with a few observations and clarifications on how I adapt a figurational viewpoint, inclusive of an attention to race as a technology of differentiation, to the particular context and findings of this study – especially in comparison to the parameters and design of the Winston Parva study (Elias and Scotson, 1994).

### ***Adaptations to the Framework***

There are two main aspects in terms of which the deployment of a figurational lens in this thesis has been adapted to the particular findings of my fieldwork: the amount and nature of data on figurational relations; and the boundaries of figurations which are analysed. As I have indicated earlier, the amount of data obtained on figurational relations was limited, and this meant that it was not possible to investigate this plane of relationality ‘on par’ with that of moral regimes and everyday justifications. A key limitation of this data was that it pertained to the figurational trajectories of specific groups on one end of the established-outsider scale, with minimal corresponding data on the views and experiences of the established or outsider groups they formed a figuration with. So, for instance, data was obtained on the figurational trajectory of Newcastle-born British Asians as a now-partly established group that still retains the traces of its past outsider status; however, no data was collected from members of the more recent outsider groups that they were antagonistic towards, such as first-generation Asian migrants, among others. This is partly because data on figurational tensions almost exclusively came forth from

recurring, follow-up engagements with six *long-term participants*, although there were a handful of occasions where short-term participants also spoke about these tensions. Of these long-term participants, no two belonged to interdependent groups in direct opposition to each other, and none were from communal groups that were identified as having an established or outsider status vis-à-vis their own group. For instance, none of them were White English from Newcastle upon Tyne – a group that, in the past and even today, is considered as more established vis-à-vis the British Asians.

As I narrate in the following chapter, the foremost reason for this limitation is that throughout fieldwork discussions on figurational matters were overshadowed by a pivotal focus on ‘matters of the trade’, whereby the subject matter at hand was the shifting economic ordering of the taxicab trade, with critiques being mounted primarily from the standpoints of the *industrial* or *market* orders of worth. It was only over time that long-term participants who had grown comfortable in sharing their views with me began to shift back-and-forth from this line of discussion, which was always the point of departure, to that of intergroup, figurational relations – something that, it has to be emphasised, would not have happened without the rapport established with them over multiple in-person engagements. Accounts of figurational relations given by these participants are drawn upon in the forthcoming empirical chapter, which – given the limited nature of the data – constitutes a *partial* inquiry into the plane of relationality of battles over status and power resources. This chapter should therefore be read not as a holistic inquiry in and of itself, but rather as an empirically informed starting point for subsequent possible inquiries into figurational tensions between members of different communal groups represented in the taxicab trade, whether in North East England or elsewhere.

The second key adaptation pertains to how exactly the *boundaries* of particular figurations, and of the groups within them, were drawn. Addressing the issue of ‘what and who a

figuration is composed by, and where the boundaries are between one figuration and another', Stanley (2017) observes:

“Experientially, of course there are generally no such sharp boundaries because people live holistic lives; *but analytically, deciding where cut-off points are for analysis is important*. For Elias, these difficulties can be ignored because Winston Parva is a boundaried community and its established and outsider groups were demarcated because located within specific areas or zones within this.”

– Stanley (2017, para. 6.4; emphasis added)

As indicated above, the Winston Parva study was set in a particular context where this issue did not arise. The research design of my ethnographic study differed from this study in two fundamental ways. First, participants were recruited on the basis of their occupation, not their communal place of residence. It was only subsequently discovered that some of them lived in the same neighbourhood or residential area, for example the West End of Newcastle, and that they belonged to the same communal group. The consequence of this was that figural boundaries and tensions were first discerned in the form they took in the context of the *work relations* of the taxicab trade. Within this context, the established and outsiders could be distinguished not just on the basis of their place of residence, but also occupational categorisations like the years they had spent in the trade, and the sector of the trade they worked in [hackney carriage or private hire]. People living in different places could therefore constitute an established or outsider group, and this was true particularly for the outsiders, who tended to live in different places yet were lumped together into one group along different lines: their race and ethnicity, whether they were first-generation migrants, and that they worked in the PHV sector. In light of this, the marking of boundaries between figurations in this study involved a compromise: whilst still undertaken on the basis of neighbourhoods or areas of residence, it allowed for the way in which participants' own delineation of group boundaries sometimes exceeded these lines. Importantly, this strategy still adheres to the imperative of the delineated figurations being 'small scale, local, specific, over

time’ in terms of how ‘cut-off points for analysis’ are determined (Stanley, 2017). As will be examined later, three such figurations were discerned – one composed of interdependent groups living and/or working in Durham, and two different ones in Newcastle upon Tyne.

The above strategy for fixing figural and group boundaries also accounts for differences observed with respect to the extent that figural relations were *centred* in one spatially delimited place. Albeit Elias and Scotson’s (1994) original analysis focused on two groups both working and co-habiting within the same delimited residential area, the figurations encountered in this study – whilst being anchored in particular places of residence – were also characterised by certain *flows* that frequently traversed beyond those places, for instance the mobilities of taxicabs and the actors who drove them, and real-time digital communication, which furthered the extent to which members of outsider groups remained in touch with family and friends residing outside the country. These two kinds of flows meant that the figurations in question were always marked by a degree of *detritorialization* (Deleuze and Guattari, 1988), in that their boundaries did not – once again – strictly correspond to those of the neighbourhoods or residential areas where they were centred. Together with the aforementioned observations on figural boundaries being erected based on other factors, adjusting to the presence of these flows is an empirical imperative, consistent with the Eliasian view that theoretical models may be revised and recast in light of the specificities of time, place, people and events encountered in sociological inquiries (Elias and Scotson, 1994, p. 22; Stanley, 2017). In particular, since now-commonplace digital technologies did not exist at the time of Elias and Scotson’s study, it also heeds the call for an ‘inevitable updating of how community phenomena are understood as new data become available’ (Crow and Laidlaw, 2019, p. 13).



## **Part IV: Research Design**

### 4.1. Methodology

Having reviewed my theoretical lens, perhaps it is an apposite time to restate that it was what I encountered during ethnographic fieldwork that led me first to pragmatic sociology, and then to figural sociology. In this sense, while I attempted to ensure that throughout the study my conceptual and methodological approaches remained mutually constitutive of each other, my decision to commence ethnographic fieldwork with taxicab drivers was pivotal – it effectively marked the starting point of an iterative research process through which the various findings discussed in this thesis came forth. It would suffice to say that at the very beginning, I did not know that asking these social actors about how their occupation had changed in recent years would almost always spark impassioned arguments and critiques, which one may either contrast or relate with their simultaneous inability to move the needle on the state of affairs. Likewise, I did not expect that this would be a social space marked by group tensions of a peculiarly antagonistic and territorial kind. As this process unfolded, I steadily recalibrated my own operationalisation of ethnography to the requirements for data collection and analysis posed by the employment of the two main frameworks, in order to articulate my fieldwork experiences with theoretical concerns. The evolution of this process will be charted in two steps: an overview of my ethnographic approach; and a narrative account of the ‘stages’ in which fieldwork unfolded, each of which involved tackling different yet partly overlapping practical and epistemological concerns. The remainder of this chapter takes up the first of these tasks.

#### ***Operationalising Ethnography with a Composite Relational Lens***

This section begins with an introduction of ethnography as my primary methodological approach, following which it proceeds to outline how my own operationalisation of it comprised two key practical strategies, both of which were chosen based on their affinity with the relational ontological positioning I assumed in this study<sup>42</sup>. Both of these strategies involved two integrated

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<sup>42</sup> See Chapter 3.1.

modes of data collection: participant-observation and in-depth interviewing. They were accompanied by concurrent taking of notes – later revisited and added to on the day itself – in two fieldwork diaries, and in the majority of instances were audio-recorded.

According to Brewer (2000), ethnography as a methodological approach ‘focuses on people's ordinary activities in naturally occurring settings, uses unstructured and flexible methods of data collection, requires the researcher to be actively involved in the field or with the people under study and explores the meanings which this human activity has for the people themselves and the wider society’ (p. 20). Owing to an emphasis on spending an extended period of time in a ‘natural’ field setting, a common way of defining ethnography is ‘ethnography-as-fieldwork’. However, ethnography does not merely refer to a specific range of methods or techniques for qualitative research, but rather ‘involves both method and methodology, in that it is more than a way of collecting data’ (p. 18). This is because ethnography has a central, organising imperative which sets it apart from other methodological approaches: the object of research, the researcher’s role in the field, as well as manner in which data is collected must be continually guided by the aim of close association with, or participation in, a naturally occurring field site (Hammerslay, 1990; Atkinson and Hammerslay, 1998).

The evolution of ethnographic research in the social sciences has been marked by an extensive range of onto-epistemological debates. As Atkinson and Hammerslay (1998, p. 129) have noted earlier, there is no single philosophical or theoretical orientation that is privileged in ethnographic inquiry. A key point of contention in this context is both epistemic and ontological; it pertains to whether ethnographic representations can lay a claim on ‘reality’, and was brought to the fore in the wake of the crises of representation and legitimation in the 1980s (Denzin and Lincoln, 1998; Brewer, 2000, pp. 38-48) as well as the science wars of the 1990s<sup>43</sup> (Latour, 2005,

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<sup>43</sup> For responses to these debates that resonate, to some extent, with the positioning taken in this study, see Atkinson (1990); Hammerslay (1990); Stanley (1990); and Brewer (1994).

p. 93). In light of these debates, it is worthwhile to clarify that the onto-epistemic positioning assumed in this study is that of ‘method assemblage’, which was discussed in Part III earlier. In short, reality is taken to be ‘both *unknowable* and *generative*’ (Law, 2004, p. 7; emphasis added), and its forms multiple yet interacting, or as Mol (2002) calls it, ‘fractional’. In this particular study, chief among these forms were those of the two ‘planes’ of relationality: critical operations tied to moral regimes on one end; and figural relations on the other. Moreover, and as pragmatic sociology also makes clear (Barthe et al., 2013), the exact form taken by reality, or the question of which reality prevails in a given spatiotemporal moment or over time, is always decided through its *enactment in practice*. This means that in trying to access and bring forth how reality is fixed in practice, method *itself* is inevitably implicated in the enactment of reality (Law and Urry, 2004). Underpinned by these stances, method assemblage consequently plays the role of both ‘reality detector’ and ‘reality amplifier’, a device which ‘detects all the periodicities, patterns or waveforms in the flux, but attends to, amplifies, and retransmits only a few whilst silencing the others’ (Law, 2004, p. 144). Two examples of this include my decision to amplify, in terms of Thévenot’s (2002; 2007) model of three different regimes of engagement, the regime of justifiable action, as well as my amplification of certain *affective* aspects of Elias and Scotson’s (1994) model of established-outsider relations, most notably the enduring and creative nature of ‘group disgrace’ attached to outsider groups.

The aforementioned perspective of method assemblage was weaved into the way I operationalised ethnography in several ways. Most principally, whether it was arguments and critiques related to the economic ordering of the taxicab trade I came to be concerned with or accounts of figural relations, my fieldwork was in the first instance geared towards tracing intersections among a myriad of expressive and material actants. Following Latour’s (2005) call for bringing forth a ‘textual account’ of the web of associations encountered in a sociological investigation, this continual mapping exercise enabled me to obtain a gradual and emergent sense of the heterogenous relations that constituted the ground on which my participants’ critical

operations, and figural conflicts, unfolded. As will become clearer in the following chapter, this two-step process reflected the way in which the theoretical vantage points I first approached the field with (Timmermans and Tavory, 2012, p. 181) – principally those of assemblage thinking and adjacent approaches – shaped the fundamentals of research design, even if I later departed from them in a more substantive sense. It was driven by the employment of two key practical strategies: multi-sited ethnography, and mobile ethnography.

### ***Multi-sited Ethnography***

Multi-sited ethnography – in short, fieldwork that spans various sites inhabited by a study's participants in the course of their everyday lives – was the first component of my ethnographic approach. In the case of my study, these sites were of two kinds: those that revolved around their work, such as their cabs themselves, taxi ranks, private hire operator offices, airports and garages; and those that were not 'work sites' (Smith, 2001) in themselves but were often frequented in the course of their working schedules, such as local cafés and takeaways/restaurants [e.g., Greggs outlets, Asian takeaways]. As I narrate in detail in the following chapter, I began by interviewing most long-term participants in the second kind of sites, and only proceeded to see them in sites of the first kind – especially their cabs themselves – once sufficient rapport had been established. A 'long-term participant' is defined as any driver who had two or more in-person engagements with me, and remained in touch over the phone for a period exceeding one month. Conversely, in the case of participants I met only once, many of whom were PHV (Uber) drivers, I was able to recruit them and conduct fieldwork in their cabs directly. A few Uber-only participants who were recruited in this manner and met me a second time chose to do so at other sites: a coffee shop on one occasion; a local park on another. In all these sites, I employed two data collection techniques: participant-observation and in-depth interviewing, supplemented by visual methods<sup>44</sup> [i.e., pictures taken on my phone] (Cipriani and Del Re, 2012; Harper, 2012) where possible.

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<sup>44</sup> Some photographs taken during fieldwork that do not appear in the main text are given in Appendix C.

An important advantage of pursuing a multi-sited approach was that by following the activities of taxicab drivers across multiple spaces – each with their own web of tangible and intangible relationships – I was able to get a sense of how these sites together constitute the ‘local’ setting in which much of their everyday life unfolds. This differed, of course, from one participant to the next. As fieldwork progressed, I inquired into the myriad connections between these sites, in order to work towards developing a sense of the multi-sited, or in other words, mapping sensibilities (Marcus, 1995; 1998) that participants *themselves* employ in articulating their situated positioning on a day-to-day basis.

Bringing forth a partial understanding of these mapping sensibilities through multi-sited fieldwork inevitably means that I myself ‘form part of the representational processes’ that my research brings to light (Atkinson et al., 2003, p. 62). For this reason, reflexivity is understood as a core ‘dimension of method’ in multi-sited ethnography (Marcus, 1995, p. 112) – something that must be a continual exercise given that the ethnographer cannot account for their findings without situating themselves in the various maps on which they are based. Haraway’s assertion (1991) that there is no view ‘from nowhere’ was thus routinely reinforced in the process of carrying out multi-sited fieldwork. Among other strategies, reflexivity was pursued by way of a secondary mapping of my own ‘research assemblage’ (Fox and Alldred, 2015) over the course of fieldwork, as well as interpreting all findings in terms of ‘partial connections’ between this assemblage and those inhabited by my participants (Haraway, 1991; Strathern, 1991). The manner in which it was weaved into fieldwork itself, as well as the writing of this thesis, is addressed in the following chapter, which sketches out a narrative of the fieldwork process that is partly based on these exercises.

### ***Mobile Ethnography and Ride-alongs***

The second key component of my ethnographic toolkit – mobile ethnography – builds upon the ‘mobility turn’ in the broader social sciences (Sheller and Urry, 2006; Urry, 2007) as well as the

rise of non-representational theory [NRT] in human geography (Thrift, 2007; Anderson and Harrison, 2016; Cook et al., 2019). Both these traditions led scholars towards conceptualising *movement* across space as a key mechanism that drives both continuity and shifts in the myriad assemblages wherein social actors may be situated. Accordingly, the strategy of mobile ethnography places a concurrent emphasis on physically partaking in the research participants' movement patterns and analysing the manner in which these mobilities inform their everyday life articulations of meanings, materials, and practices (Novoa, 2015; see also Creswell, 2006; Sheller and Urry, 2006; Büscher et al., 2011).

In the first instance, bringing in this approach was intended to more fully interrogate the highly itinerant nature of the cab driving occupation. It enabled me to sketch my participants' sense of the city, inclusive of local areas and routes that feature prominently in the course of their work routines, the spatiotemporal rhythms of flows tied to these, and the meanings they ascribe to this familiarised geography. Rather than taking a given mobility pattern as being 'existent' in the cab drivers' everyday lives, I considered how it *flickers* at specific times and spaces, after which it may become dormant until it is engaged with again – this time possibly taking a different form (Tironi, 2010). Alternatively speaking, each mobility pattern entailed a periodic 'gelling' of relationships which was salient to it (White, 1995; Sheller, 2004); one example of this is late night fares picked up from nightclubs, which involve a spatiotemporally distinct kind of interpersonal interaction [e.g., with drunk, rowdy, sometimes racist customers]. I also learned about the embodied, sensory and material entanglements tied to the mobile spatiality of driving a cab. Following Thrift (2007, pp. 59-60), the body in this context was considered as not just corporeal, but rather a composite entity whose various non-human extensions [e.g., the cab driven] are fully internal to it (Harman, 2002). Over time, this attention to mobilities began to fill in the places *between* those pieces of the puzzle I had encountered in the course of doing multi-sited fieldwork, and in this way significantly added to my understanding of the contexts in which my participants' critical operations and figurational conflicts arose.

Data collection through mobile ethnography was driven by the technique of ‘ride-alongs’ (Wegerif, 2019; Seim, 2024), whereby I accompanied my participants as they drove their cabs around the city. Due to ethical considerations as well as regulations tied to taxicab licensing, these ride-alongs were conducted when there was no customer, or in the case of most PHV (Uber) participants, no other customer present. I organised them in two different ways, depending on the participants involved. In the case of long term participants, I waited until sufficient rapport had been established before I asked them to take me along in their cabs. This involved, for example, joining them on a lunchtime trip to the takeaway where they often eat, or more planned trips where I accompanied them as they went [with an ‘empty’ cab] to pick up a customer at the airport, after which I exited their cab to make my own way back. On the other end, funding from Durham University’s Department of Sociology and South College allowed me to book trips with Uber drivers, many of whom I was able to recruit during the ride itself. Following the approach taken by Josh Seim (2020) in his ride-alongs with EMT ambulance workers, I strategically booked these trips at different times of day, on weekdays and weekends, and with different pick-up and drop-off locations, some of which I had never been to before. Further detail on this particular stage of fieldwork is given in the following chapter.

Going on these ride-alongs had several advantages, and it would not be an understatement to say that they proved to be the most insightful as well as most enjoyable part of the fieldwork journey. While a ride-along ‘can never completely be the same experience [as that of the participant], given the researcher’s different perspective, the impact of their presence and the temporary nature of their involvement’, it is still ‘much closer to the experience of the participant than if one was never there’ (Wegerif, 2019, p. 5) – in other words, as close to an *in situ* mobile positioning as possible. Although the absence of a customer in the cab meant that my use of this technique did not fully qualify as me ‘shadowing’ the participants (Czarniawska, 2007), the rapport established with long-term participants in prior engagements, as well as a few follow-up ride-alongs, fostered an increasing sense of comfort and familiarity. That some ride-alongs



provided a pathway to eating together was of particular importance in this regard – it facilitated conversations that exceeded the boundaries of the researcher-researched divide, enabling participants to let me into their world just a little bit more. The spatial position I assumed in most ride-alongs – ‘riding shotgun’ in the passenger seat – also led to increased reciprocity and a closer form of interaction with participants (Dahl and Tjora, 2023).

Perhaps the most important advantage, however, was being able to witness an *intensification of affective flows* in participants ‘on the move’. I found that during ride-alongs, participants exhibited a demeanour that was at the same time significantly more assertive, angry, humorous, and frank, as compared to when we sat down for an in-person interview at a fixed location like a café. In fact, as I narrate in the following chapter, some of them happened to share certain thoughts whilst driving that they then asked to be excluded from my data. This observation on affect being *charged* during ride-alongs chimes with previous scholarly work on the intersections between automobilities and affect (Sachs, 1992; Sheller, 2004; 2007; Thrift, 2004; Merriman, 2009), and on another note, sociologist Fred Davis’ (1959) observation that cabdrivers – owing to the ‘highly impersonal’ and ‘fleeting’ nature of their everyday interactions – tend to ‘feel less compunction about discussing their own private lives...and “sounding off” on a great many topics and issues than do others’ (p. 160). In my case, this charging of affect proved invaluable in helping to reveal both the depth of reflexivity tied to disputes over the economic ordering of the taxicab trade, as well as the ‘rawness’ of feeling that suffused figural conflicts. A number of the accounts analysed in the empirical chapters of this thesis would simply not have come forth without the openings into participants’ worlds created by this particular technique of ethnographic fieldwork.

## 4.2. Stages of Fieldwork

This chapter retraces the steps of ethnographic fieldwork undertaken for this study. Organised in a chronological manner, it narrates the salient events and scenes, recruitment and sampling techniques, practical challenges of time, access and establishing rapport, epistemological concerns as well as other happenings that were partly unique to each ‘stage’ in which fieldwork occurred. At the same time, it demonstrates how these stages – in the order in which they took place – were instrumental in progressively shaping my research questions and the choice of the two key theoretical frameworks [orders of worth and established-outsider relations] employed in addressing them. The key analytical strategy that guided, and accompanied, this process was that of *abduction*: ‘a creative inferential process aimed at producing new hypotheses and theories based on *surprising research evidence*’ (Timmermans and Tavory, 2012, p. 167; emphasis added).

Geared towards a ‘double-fitting of theory and anomalous observations’ (p. 173), this strategy proceeds through a recursive movement between data collection and analysis in order to generate, validate and revise hypotheses in terms of different theoretical frameworks. Both induction and deduction are enlisted in this task: ‘Once a hypothesis has been formed, deduction helps work out the hypothesis by providing a plausible generalization or causal chain. Induction constitutes the evaluation of the hypothesis because it provides the data that should conform to the deductively delineated premises’ (p. 171). This interplay between the field and the data, and between inductively-drawn themes and theoretically-informed deduction, acts as the impetus for a gradual movement towards suitable theoretical frameworks for ‘casing’ the data (Ragin and Becker, 1992; Tavory and Timmermans, 2009) – those with sufficient correspondence so they may enliven it, but also room for adaptation, revision and development in light of the incongruities discerned.

In somewhat different, more digestible terms, this entire strategy was aptly summarised by Chicago sociologist Fred Davis in a talk on how to craft a ‘sociological story’ from stories

encountered in the field: ‘In any case, the *disjunction of imposition* [of theoretical frameworks] begins to generate an internal dialectic in which the [sociological] story illuminates the data, the data modifies the story, and so forth, to where, hopefully, in the end you come out with something coherent, something readable and, best of all, perhaps, something interesting’ (Davis, 1974, p. 312; emphasis added). Likewise, a similar account was given by Howard Becker of the process of conducting participant-observation for sociological research – split into certain ‘stages’ to which the stages in my narrative somewhat correspond (Becker, 1958, pp. 652-53).

Besides being bound up with the strategy of abductive analysis (Timmermans and Tavory, 2012; 2022) for the genesis of research questions, the fieldwork process also informed the designation of terminological categories that came to be adopted in this thesis. These included, for example, the referent ‘taxicab driving’ for the occupation, which was chosen after other, more intuitive referents [e.g., ‘cab driving’, ‘taxi driving’] were found to be politically contested, and the identification of participants by an alias, regulatory category of taxicab driving [hackney versus PHV, along with further distinctions within PHV] and licensing authority, as well as group identities such as ‘British Asian’ and ‘White English’.

The following narrative expounds upon selected salient events that unfolded during fieldwork, as well as the deployment of abductive analysis, in a cumulative fashion. Drawing on previous work (Khan, 2022), it is written in an autoethnographic style, such that reflections on my own fieldwork journey are interspersed with the events recalled.

### ***Stage I: Stepping into the Taxi Worlds***

When I commenced fieldwork in the first week of August 2022, I had set out to explore a set of research questions that were originally focused on taxicab drivers’ health<sup>45</sup>, encompassing matters like their characterisation as an ‘at risk’ population, as well as the everyday practices and wider

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<sup>45</sup> These questions can be seen in the initial participant information sheet in Appendix E. This was provided to participants along with the consent form, given in Appendix F.

relations that lie behind the production of adverse health outcomes, a first indication of which was provided by the Office for National Statistics (2020) finding that their Covid mortality rate was higher than that of doctors, nurses and care workers. I had engaged with literatures on risk technologies in the Foucauldian tradition (Dean, 1998), Thévenot's (2001) model of pragmatic regimes of engagement, practice-based 'praxiographic' inquiries into health (Mol, 2002; Moreira, 2018) and assemblage ethnography (Wahlberg, 2022) in developing these questions, and in this sense these were some of the key theoretical frameworks I first approached the field with. To begin recruitment, I drafted some invitations to participate in the research and shared them in a Facebook group of taxicab drivers based in Durham. I was contacted by two drivers the same day, and another the next day<sup>46</sup>, and met them at local cafés in the city over the course of the next two weeks. Two of them were hackney carriage drivers, while one was a PHV driver with previous hackney experience. Their recruitment was the first instance of using a random sampling technique for recruitment, with the sample drawn from the pool of Durham-based drivers who maintained an online presence and were active in this group. Upon being debriefed, all three of them agreed to participate in the research.

Yet it was these initial meetings that already began to reveal a mismatch between what I had set out to investigate, and the priorities of the participants themselves. It was not that they didn't value a rare study on health in their occupation, but rather that they hinted there were more pressing issues at stake. I initially attributed this to a lack of rapport, as I believed they will only really become forthcoming in discussing health once I had met them a few times. Follow-up engagements were organised for a fortnight later, and were scheduled such that I would meet a minimum of one participant per week. Although these engagements did begin to reveal more about how these drivers managed their own health on an everyday basis, discussions continued to be redirected towards another issue: how the taxicab trade had experienced a fundamental shift

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<sup>46</sup> One of them left me their number, after which I gave them a call to arrange a meeting. The other two private messaged on Facebook itself.

in recent years, through the rise of platforms like Uber. While these participants acceded that taxicab driving has always been an ‘unhealthy’ occupation, they suggested that this wider process of platformisation – which they themselves recognised as everything related to ‘the rise of Uber’ – was intensifying and recasting risk factors for physical and mental health, too. I continued to take note of this, and by the end of August, shifted the focus of my study to platformisation itself. Contestations over economic and socio-technical relations in the taxicab trade became my primary object of study. While an interrogation of health continued to be pursued, it was subsumed into the wider focus on the repercussions of platformisation, and in due course I decided that it should be excluded from the ‘sociological story’ (Davis, 1974) I tell in this thesis. Salient findings on health were instead reworked into a journal article on platformisation and health, which is now under review.

The first three participants I had recruited wholly supported this change of focus. Owing in part to my affirmation of their own concerns and in part to the all-encompassing nature of the topic of platformisation, our conversations seemed to flow much easier. At this stage, although I had developed a revised interview schedule<sup>47</sup> with preliminary questions aimed at garnering participants’ views on changes the trade had experienced since the arrival of Uber, my focus on platformisation was yet to crystallise into concrete research questions to which fieldwork could be specifically oriented. I had abandoned most of the theoretical frameworks I planned on using earlier, and approached the new problem with assemblage thinking and adjacent approaches [e.g., affect theory, ANT], which were already key to the theoretical orientation I had cultivated by this point (Timmermans and Tavory, 2012, p. 173). However, based on what I had learned in the first month of fieldwork, I chose to adopt a different strategy: take some time to acquaint myself as much as possible with what the controversy of platformisation and the rise of Uber involves, further develop the preliminary questions on an ongoing basis, continually sift through the

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<sup>47</sup> This forms part of the revised participant information sheet [see Appendix D] that was given to participants from this point onwards.

material to identify the key issues at stake, engage with other theoretical frameworks to assess if they better ‘fit’ those issues, and in this manner work my way towards more specific research questions whose exploration can support the carving of a sociological story (Davis, 1974). This marked the beginning of the process of abductive analysis. Subsequent engagements with the three Durham-based participants, as well as a scoping interview with an ex-cab driver manager of a major private hire firm in the North East, set this process into motion.

Each of these engagements involved semi-structured, in-person interviews that lasted on average for one hour, were audio-recorded, accompanied by detailed note-taking in a field notes diary, and in most cases transcribed and input for coding in NVivo<sup>48</sup> within a few days. The interviews were semi-structured in the sense that I planned ahead<sup>49</sup> for what should be probed into: these may have been issues a participant had raised for the first time towards the end of the preceding engagement, or follow-up questions on an issue we continued to dissect together [e.g., Uber’s dynamic pricing]. Excluding some brief interruptions<sup>50</sup>, this frequency and duration of in-depth interviewing continued to remain the case with the three Durham-based participants, all of whom became long-term participants over time. Throughout September, they steadily brought me up to speed with not only how the taxicab trade [hackney and PHV] works, but also why the rise of Uber had been both a highly transformative as well as controversial development. Many of these observations were shared among all three participants, in many cases reinforcing one another.

### ***Stage II: Start of Participant-Observation, and First Encounters with Stinging Critiques***

By late September 2022, I had settled into regular biweekly engagements with the three Durham-based participants, and felt that it was time to expand recruitment – particularly to other areas of

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<sup>48</sup> Appendix B provides screenshots of the final coding hierarchy in NVivo.

<sup>49</sup> Some exhibits from my two fieldwork diaries are given in Appendix A.

<sup>50</sup> Most of these were owed to either me or the participants travelling out of the North East, although there was also a month-long gap with one participant over the Christmas and New Year period.

North East England. Targeting the largest city of Newcastle-upon-Tyne seemed like a sensible route to take. I followed the same strategy as earlier: identified and joined a Facebook group of Newcastle taxi drivers, drafted a new call to participation in a study focused on change in the industry as well as health, and attempted to share it. Upon doing so, however, I learned that this group required admin approval for all posts. So I figured out who the admin was, and somewhat akin to approaching a ‘gatekeeper’, sent them a private message introducing myself and requesting for my post to be approved. I did not hear back from them, but the next day I saw that my post had been shared. Some ‘likes’ were received, and people tagged in comments, but no one reached out. After waiting for another day, I messaged the admin again, thanking them for approving the post and asking them if they would themselves like to participate in the research. I was told to contact them over the phone. Later that afternoon, I phoned the number provided, and spoke to a man I refer to as Ali in later chapters.

This call made for a memorable moment in my fieldwork. I did manage to recruit Ali, but only after he castigated me on my generic use of terms like ‘taxi driving’ and ‘taxis’, which he took as an indication of my as-yet inadequate knowledge of the trade. In an attempt to remedy this, he gave me a detailed overview of the ‘two-tier’ legislation governing the overall taxicab trade [see Part II], as well as ‘byelaws’ for hackney carriage drivers (see Newcastle City Council, 2023), which supplement national legislation on a local basis. I also learned that he had been a longtime organiser in Newcastle’s hackney carriage trade, which presumably meant that he could put me in touch with other potential participants. His recruitment marked the first instance of a non-white, British Asian participant being included in the sample; up until this point, I had only recruited White English drivers. Born in Britain to (Azad) Kashmiri/Pakistani parents, he seemed intrigued by my own positionality as a Pakistani. My fluency in Urdu and Punjabi – which he could barely speak, but understood – particularly seemed to add to his willingness to participate in my research. He spoke to me in English, but with the occasional phrase or two in Urdu/Punjabi thrown in for emphasis, allowing me to momentarily switch to those languages. At the time we

had this phone call, he was away on contract work in the North West, so a meeting could not be set up straight away. Since he was unable to confirm when he would be returning to Newcastle, I set up a reminder on my calendar to check in with him in two weeks' time. He would call me himself ten days later [5 October 2022], telling me he was back in town.

In this intervening period, another key moment in my fieldwork occurred: my first-ride along. It marked the beginning of participant-observation, as well as mobile ethnography, in the process of data collection. Organised with David, it involved accompanying him on a drive from Durham city to Newcastle airport and back, whilst I took down jottings in my fieldnotes diary. Compared to our previous engagements, I found that he had a very relaxed demeanour, sharing all manner of stories with me about his adventures as an endurance runner, capitalising on 'spoiled' university students booking successive Uber trips during 'surge' periods, and even why a section of taxicab drivers prefer to stick with cash earnings, which he later asked to be retracted from my notes. Observations and accounts from this ride-along will be taken up for analysis in the forthcoming empirical chapters. For now, I would just like to underline that this was my first experience of getting as close as possible to what taxicab driving, or more particularly private hire driving, is *really* like: on the move, city lights flashing, with the Uber app open on the phone mount. It motivated me to try and organise as many ride-alongs as I could from this point forward.

I did not have to wait long for the next one, which seemed to materialise without much planning on my part. When Ali got back in touch with me at the beginning of October, he asked me to take the train to Newcastle, from where I was picked up by a colleague of his and dropped off to a place in Gateshead, where he was waiting. From there, he drove me in his hackney carriage to a small Asian takeaway often frequented by taxicab drivers, which in due course became a key site of participant-observation and in-depth interviewing in our engagements. Knowing that I was Pakistani, he was keen for me to try the excellent, authentic food at the takeaway, which was run by two (Azad) Kashmiri/Pakistani brothers who were former cabbies and longtime friends of his.



Fieldwork conducted at this takeaway marked a departure from interviews and participant-observation being conducted on a strictly individual basis: on all my visits here, the ‘takeaway brothers’, some friends and acquaintances of Ali as well as other taxicab drivers visiting for a meal would sometimes pitch in on the conversation. However, this seldom amounted to them actively joining the conversation, which would return to being between me and Ali alone.

Over the course of this two-hour engagement with Ali – first the ride-along, then eating together at the takeaway – I encountered perhaps the most in-depth series of critiques over how the taxicab trade had changed over the past decade, and why this was controversial, illegitimate and downright unjust. Stinging in nature, they took aim at actors ranging from Uber, the Cameron-led central government, local councils, and Uber drivers themselves. Once I had returned home and revisited my fieldwork notes, I was surprised at how consistently critical he had been of these developments, which demonstrated the extent to which they really unsettled him. Across the remainder of October, more critiques – particularly on the theme of how Uber was ‘allowed to do things’ that were inconceivable previously – emerged from my three Durham-based participants. Increasing rapport meant that these participants were becoming less and less taciturn in sharing their views in an impassioned, assertive manner.

Perhaps as a result of my meeting with Ali, I began to notice that every engagement now involved participants tending towards argumentative rather than merely descriptive responses to the questions I posed. To recall, these questions were originally broad-based – mainly inquiring into the ways in which the taxicab industry had undergone transformation since the arrival of Uber – but once their initial iterations had been addressed, they began to turn specific, focusing for instance on the details of the ‘cross-border hire’ controversy, the scrapping of a topographical route test requirement for licensing in Newcastle, fares offered under Uber’s dynamic pricing, etc. In this sense, they actively evolved over time. One way in which they were inductively developed was by triangulating views on a specific issue raised by one participant by asking about it from

other participants, whilst being careful in not compromising anonymity; all long-term participants were aware of my employment of this strategy.

It was around this time in October, when I had realised that my engagements were distinctly marked by responses of a *critical* kind, that I returned to a book I had briefly perused a few months prior: *On Justification: Economies of Worth* (Boltanski and Thévenot, 2006). I had originally come to know of this work through my engagement with Thévenot's (2001) model of pragmatic regimes of engagement. Upon returning to it, I found that a number of critiques mounted by hackney carriage participants, as well as the PHV participant David, had connections with the authors' outline of an *industrial* order of worth, aspects of which could also be discerned in the regulatory framework governing the UK's taxicab trade. This prompted me to engage in detail with all the six orders of worth they outlined, as well as further work in the tradition of pragmatic sociology (Barthe et al., 2013; Stark, 2017; Heinich, 2020). I started taking steps towards devising more specific research questions that could be addressed in tandem with this framework, which seemed particularly suited to further unravelling and then analysing the *critical operations* of my participants. In other words, I undertook an 'alternative casing' (Timmermans and Tavory, 2022), as a result of which my earlier theoretical toolkit of assemblage thinking and adjacent approaches began to recede in the background. Consistent with the Latin etymology of abduction, this was the first significant *leading away* from those earlier theoretically cultivated ways of perceiving the world, made possible in large measure by the methodological strategy of continually revisiting my fieldnotes and adapting the focus of fieldwork accordingly. As Timmermans and Tavory (2012) say: 'Where [known] theories allow us initially to see the phenomenon in sociologically interesting ways, methods are designed to compel us to revisit the same observation again and again, *defamiliarize the known world*, and apply alternative casings to our observations' (p. 176; emphasis added).

By the end of October, I had recruited three more PHV participants, all of whom worked solely on the Uber app. I had found it a challenge to participants of this kind: no Uber-only driver had reached out to me after posting in Facebook groups, even though it seemed that many of them were present there. So I had told friends and colleagues that if they happened to take an Uber and found themselves having a nice chat with their driver, to let them know about my study, and obtain their contact details if they seem receptive. A few weeks later, I was passed on the details of a British Asian driver, after which I called him and found that he was happy to meet. Nicknamed Asim in this thesis, he picked me up at the end of his shift in Durham and I joined him on his journey home, which was in Sunderland, interviewing him along the way and then at a small car park next to where he lived. His views, which feature prominently in later empirical chapters, exhibited a strong alignment with the *market* – and as I was to later find – the *connexionist* orders of worth (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005). This contrast with the views of other participants – both hackney carriage *and* private hire – threw into relief that what I was witnessing in my fieldwork was, in a fundamental sense, critical operations tied to moral conflict over the *economic ordering* of the taxicab trade. Arriving at this conclusion only strengthened my conviction that tapping into the orders of worth framework would be a productive direction to take for the study. Four research questions on critical operations were finalised at this point; these are listed under the category of ‘critical operations and moral regimes’ in the following chapter.

Shortly after my ride-along with Asim, I had a phone engagement with an Indian PHV (Uber) driver, who consented to our half-hour conversation being part of my study but then fell out of contact, so a meeting could not be arranged. Nonetheless, my conversation with him proved useful in learning more about the experiences of full-time Uber drivers. A few days after this, I myself took an Uber and succeeded in recruiting another PHV (Uber) participant. Referred to as Obi, he was a first-generation migrant from Nigeria. Although I had already come across some accounts of group tensions in prior engagements, Obi specifically raised ‘the issue of racism’ – not just from customers, but also other taxicab drivers – for the first time in my fieldwork. I found

this intriguing, and began to wonder whether there might be some connections between group tensions and racialisation on one end, and the shifting economic ordering of the taxicab trade on the other. Although this did not become a focus of my study until a few months later, I began probing into the issue more intently and attempting to ‘case’ the data obtained in terms of different theoretical frameworks, such as Bourdieusian field theory and work in anthropology on racializing assemblages (Weheliye, 2020). At the same time, however, I continued to expect that it might still prove to be a different matter altogether and eventually fall outside the scope of my thesis.

I found it hard to organise follow-up meetings with both Asim and Obi, and when I did eventually manage to do so<sup>51</sup>, it was understood that they did not have any more time to give to my research. Multiple plans to meet had to be postponed, but I was ultimately glad that they did, in the end, qualify as long-term participants. Part of this elusiveness appeared to be linked to how – as full-time Uber drivers – their schedules were highly contingent upon what the Uber app offered them. Although I continued to seek out more Uber-only participants, I started thinking about what to do if none came forth. In the meantime, fieldwork with hackney carriage participants and David continued apace, with multiple engagements held across November and December. This included ride-alongs as well as observation and participant-observation at taxi ranks in Durham and Newcastle, including on busy weekend nights during the Christmas period.

### ***Stage III: Enter Figurational Conflict***

We are now at the beginning of 2023, by which time I had recruited three hackney carriage and four private hire drivers, six of whom became long-term participants. As rapport continued to increase, some long-term participants shared a number of personal stories with me in interviews, ride-alongs and observation sessions held over the course of Christmas and the New Year. This

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<sup>51</sup> My second engagement with Obi happened around two weeks after I first met him on an Uber trip. I was not able to meet Asim again until February 2023; however, we had multiple phone conversations and text exchanges in the meantime, and a few more beyond our second meeting.

helped me contextualise their arguments and critiques in terms of how and when they had come to work in the taxicab trade, and the investments they had made in it, which now appeared to be threatened. I was also mapping the multiple positionings participants took in critiquing the shifting economic ordering of the trade, and the extent to which they corresponded to aspects of the *industrial*, *market* and/or *connexionist* orders of worth. Although hackney carriage drivers tended to fiercely defend an *industrial* ordering of work relations, which in their view had been steadily eroded, the positionings taken across participants were diverse, and often involved *compromises* between aspects of two or more orders (Thévenot, 2002) – even where they exhibited a primary alignment with one of them.

In mid-January, I held my third in-person engagement with Ali, which – lasting for almost four hours – ended up being the longest single-day engagement with any participant. It began with us meeting at the takeaway in Gateshead, but since our conversation was still underway when it was closing up an hour and a half later, I was invited back to his home, a 15-minute drive away. This would be the only time I would spend time with a participant at their place of residence, and its significance can be gleaned from two key takeaways from this engagement. The first of these pertained to Ali's charismatic claim that the critical stances he had taken in our prior engagements were likely to be shared with hackney carriage drivers 'across the country'. This was partly true for the Durham hackneys I had recruited, and in due course, for *all* hackney participants in the study. That hackneys in different areas agreed on what the economic ordering of the taxicab trade *ought* to be like provided an instance of cross-ethnic solidarities in invoking certain *industrial* virtues that these drivers continue to value when it comes to that ordering, for instance *professional qualifications* like topographical route tests.

The second takeaway, however, was notable since it provided the first clear indication of the presence of two 'planes' of relationality in the field I had set out to explore. Over the course of our meeting, Ali expanded upon a theme he had already begun to delve into in previous

engagements: longstanding group tensions between the White English and British Asians in Newcastle, both in the taxicab trade and in a wider ‘communal’ sense. Interestingly, he then proceeded to deride various more recent outsider/newcomer groups, including recent Asian migrants. Upon revisiting the data after this engagement, I noted that there was a striking similarity between accounts of three different variations of group tensions I had encountered so far: between the White English and British Asians in Newcastle; between those British Asians and ‘newer’ outsider groups; and between the White English and various non-white outsider groups in Durham. I was prompted to return to the book *The Established and the Outsiders: A Sociological Enquiry into Community Problems* (Elias and Scotson, 1994), especially the observation of a ‘*pars pro toto* distortion in opposite directions’ whereby the established group in question would ‘attribute to its outsider group *as a whole* the “bad” characteristics of that group’s “worst” section’, whilst their own ‘we-image’ would be based on the ‘minority of the best’ within their group (p. xix; emphasis added).

Numerous examples of this could be identified in data on the three variations of group tensions noted above. For instance, with respect to the second variation, Ali’s stigmatising accusations against more recent outsider groups in the engagement we had just had resembled this dynamic. They later came to be echoed in views expressed by two more British Asian hackneys as well as one Pakistani PHV (Uber) driver, who were recruited over the remaining seven months of fieldwork. The former two hackneys were referred to me by Ali himself, and in this sense joined the study through the ‘snowballing’ sampling technique. The same was true for a Newcastle-based White English hackney who had known Ali in his capacity as an organiser in the trade, bringing the total number of participants recruited through this route to three.

My discernment of the *pars pro toto* distortion noted above, and that it was clearly at play in three variations of group tensions encountered in my fieldwork, led me to a thorough engagement with Elias and Scotson’s (1994) model of established-outsider relations, alongside

further work in figural sociology. I moved away from the theoretical frameworks I had considered earlier in trying to make sense of data on group tensions, and began to actively ‘case’ it in terms of this framework (Timmermans and Tavory, 2022), making its terms the basis for renewed rounds of coding in NVivo as well as further rounds of data collection in the field. I knew that obtaining more data on figural conflict, which went beyond the boundaries of the taxicab trade, would be difficult; it seemed to require a level of access that was painstakingly attained with long-term participants. Nevertheless, I resolved that I would actively inquire into it wherever the opportunity arose, alongside my primary focus on critical operations relating to the economic ordering of the taxicab trade. Three key research questions that guided this parallel inquiry are listed in the next chapter, and will be addressed in the last of the four empirical chapters in this thesis.

When fieldwork concluded in mid-July 2023, I still believed that the data I had collected on figural relations would be better suited for either a separate journal article or a subsequent study. However, systematically coding and analysing this data in NVivo after fieldwork, and later during writing up, increasingly underlined the salience of these relations, especially in the accounts of long-term participants who had devoted much time and energy to my research. Following the abductive analysis heuristics of ‘revisiting the phenomenon’ at multiple points in time, and ‘defamiliarization’ in acts of inscription, led me to a situation whereby ‘[objects] that were relegated to the background of our experience, as they were too taken for granted to be given a second thought, suddenly become possible focal points’ (Timmermans and Tavory, 2012, p. 177). In due course, I moved towards developing the viewpoint of the two ‘planes’ of relationality, through which I was able to incorporate an analysis of figural relations in this thesis. This analysis is undertaken in the last of the four empirical chapters.

#### ***Stage IV: Ubering Around the North East***

The previous section has somewhat deviated from the temporal progression of how fieldwork unfolded. This was done in order to clarify how epistemological concerns came to encompass figurational relations, and how this secondary focus then evolved throughout the remainder of the PhD, eventually becoming part of this thesis. I now return to addressing the final stage of fieldwork, which primarily involved ride-alongs with PHV (Uber) drivers and took place between April and July 2023. Throughout the first quarter of 2023, I continued trying to recruit more Uber-only participants from online forums and through referrals by friends and colleagues, but with the exception of one online participant, did not manage to do so. I then pursued an alternative strategy: apply for funding from my department and college at Durham University, and if it is awarded, utilise it by booking trips on the Uber app and trying to recruit the drivers in the process. I was able to obtain this funding, and gratefully acknowledge the support provided by the Department of Sociology and South College for this study.

Prior to the first of this series of ride-alongs, another notable development occurred: I messaged an anonymous account whose tweets sometimes came up in my feed, which had slowly started featuring accounts affiliated with the taxicab trade. I had found these tweets interesting as they often defended Uber in the face of strong criticism, and sometimes abuse, from other accounts. When I heard back from this person, who I call Tom in this thesis, I found out that he was actually a hackney carriage driver who had switched to predominantly working on the Uber app. This made the contrarian views in those tweets even more interesting: not only was this a hackney carriage driver mounting an unlikely defence of Uber, but also mobilising his knowledge of taxicab regulation in the process – something that is often observed in hackneys, but seldom expressed in this manner. Tom, who was based in the South East of England, provided detailed written responses to questions I sent him over Twitter direct messages in March 2023, and later also responded to several follow-up questions. These responses made for a vivid contrast with the



views of another remote participant I recruited in the same month: Alec, the head of a London black cab drivers' association. I spoke to Alec on the phone for over an hour. He had decades of experience as a full-time black cabbie, and continued to work part-time. Whereas Tom's views conflicted with those expressed by other hackney participants, Alec's appeared to be a much more inflamed and combative version of them. Both will be taken up for analysis in the forthcoming empirical chapters.

In the third week of April 2023, I went on my first four ride-alongs by booking trips directly on the Uber app. I was able to recruit three of the four drivers, whilst one refused. He seemed wary of a 'PhD student at Durham University' investigating the working conditions of Uber drivers by booking trips in this manner, possibly believing that his privacy would be at risk. Once I realised this, I reassured him that I respected his concerns and would not inquire any further. The remaining drivers were all friendly, agreeing to participate within the first few minutes of the trip. These four rides lasted for an average for 20 minutes each, and took me from Durham to a location in Gateshead, then to a pub in Newcastle, then eastwards to the North Shields coast, and finally back to another pub in a different area of Newcastle.

There were two key takeaways from these engagements: a range of critiques, primarily in terms of the *market* order, of the work relations of Uber driving; and the way in which these drivers formed certain *market-connexionist* compromises in order to justify and attribute worth to their continued engagement in the work activity. A subsequent round of ride-alongs in May 2023, over which I managed to recruit all three of the drivers I met, also gravitated towards these two themes. By the time funding had been exhausted, I had managed to recruit six more Uber-only participants, bringing the total number of participants in this category to nine, and the total number of PHV participants to twelve. A visual breakdown of all participants and their categories is given in the following section.

All Uber drivers I recruited through the ride-alongs in April and May 2023 did not share their details for a subsequent meeting. Neither were our conversations audio-recorded, as consent had not been obtained at the beginning of the ride and I believed it may be jeopardised if I asked about recording right afterwards. Instead, stopping at a place right after the ride ended – like those pubs I mentioned above – enabled me to add detail to the jottings I had taken during the ride. Upon returning home, these were promptly converted into a transcript on my computer and entered into an NVivo project for coding. The extracts from these transcripts that appear in subsequent chapters are those parts of the conversation that I noted down during the ride itself, and therefore can say with a high level of confidence that they reflect, with very minor adjustments, the exact words of the participants.

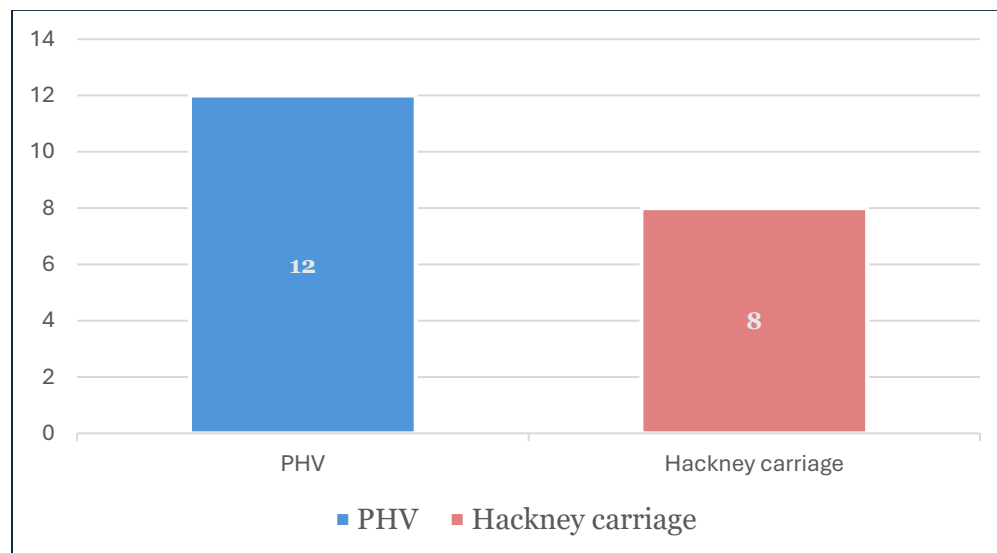
After concluding these two rounds of ride-alongs, I returned to doing a few more engagements with hackney carriage participants – both long-term ones, and new recruits. Notable among these were my two meetings with Osman, a late long-term participant who not only came forth with some distinct *industrial* critiques of shifts in the economic ordering of the taxicab trade, but also provided data on figurational conflict between different communal groups in Newcastle. My very last engagement was with PHV (Uber + own operator) participant David, who had – by far – given the most time to my research. I took him out for lunch in Durham to thank him for his participation, and we continue to remain in touch today.

### ***Synopsis and Ethical Considerations***

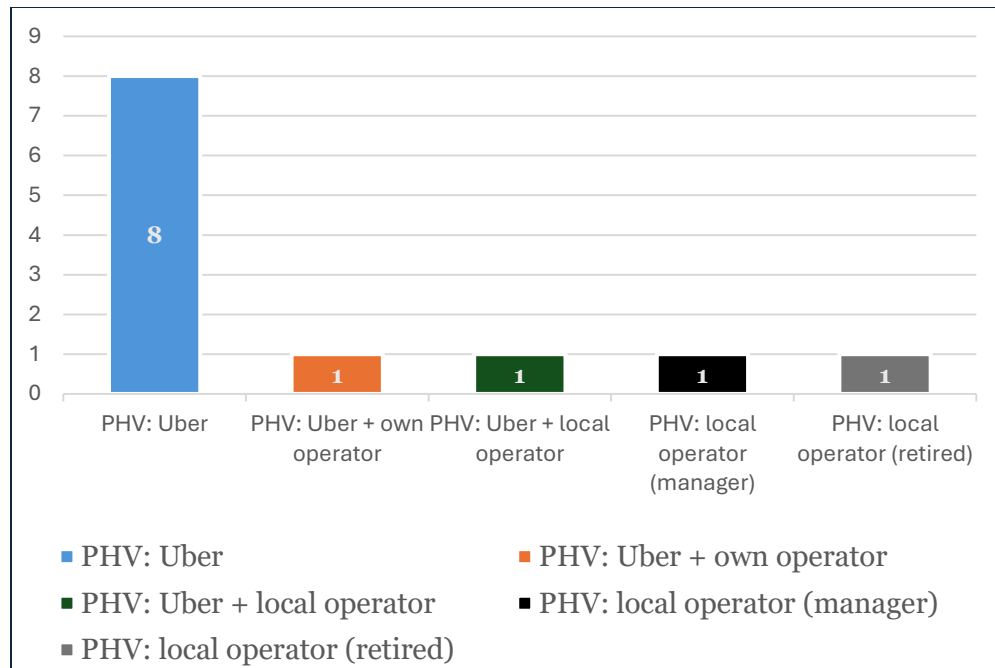
The foregoing narrative has traced the progression of ethnographic fieldwork over an 11-month period from August 2022 to July 2023. It began by recalling how recruitment for the study began with ‘random’ sampling from Facebook groups – an approach that later expanded into different routes, for example referrals from friends and colleagues, and ride-alongs organised by booking trips directly on the Uber app, which algorithmically matches riders and drivers based on its own, opaque criteria. Alongside random sampling, I also utilised the snowballing technique, through

which three drivers known to long-term hackney participant Ali joined the study. Finally, I pursued what may be called ‘opportunistic’ sampling in interviewing a manager at a major private hire company as well as the head of a London black cab drivers’ association, contacting and then obtaining written responses from someone on Twitter, and meeting a now-retired PHV driver in order to learn more about how this sector of taxicab driving used to work before the arrival of Uber.

All in all, 20 participants were recruited. Figures 5 and 6 below provide breakdowns in terms of regulatory category and type of PHV driving, whilst the Table of Participants [Figure 7] in a forthcoming chapter provides detail on further attributes, such as ethnicity and years of experience in the taxicab trade. In addition to in-person, phone and/or online engagements with these participants, there were also ephemeral interactions – for instance brief conversations with drivers queued up at taxi ranks whilst distributing flyers at the beginning of my fieldwork, and acquaintances of Asian participants interjecting in conversations at takeaways – that contributed to my understanding of the field I was navigating as a researcher.



**Figure 5:** Breakdown of participants by regulatory category



**Figure 6:** Breakdown of participants by type of PHV driving

In order to ensure anonymity, all participants were given aliases<sup>52</sup>, by which they are referred to throughout this thesis. Informed consent was validated on a ‘process consent’ basis (Plankey-Videla, 2012, p. 3), such that I would ask at a few points over the course of a single engagement, and also across engagements, if a participant wished for something to be excluded from the dataset. This led one participant to retract some parts of accounts he had given in two different engagements, and another to ask that his licensing authority be redacted in all written outputs. In light of the retractions by the former participant, certain observations from other participants that I thought would be deemed sensitive, for instance those relating to the taxicab trade partly operating on a cash basis, were excluded altogether from the dataset. Some long-term participants who remained in touch beyond the fieldwork period were also provided with short drafts of sections of this thesis, after which they suggested minor edits that were made to their satisfaction. The foremost concern expressed by participants during fieldwork itself was that their

<sup>52</sup> One participant offered for me to use their real identity in my thesis and any subsequent works, but I declined, telling them that it would be ethically inappropriate to do so.

driver and vehicle license plate numbers, as well as vehicle registration details, should not be disclosed in any way whatsoever, to which I reassured them that this would be impossible under the terms of ethical approval granted to this study.

This concern was directly linked to a fear of possible reprisals from council officials, who the drivers – in the present era of platformisation – often saw as political adversaries rather than allies. Knowing this, I sent officials of one local licensing authority multiple invites to contribute their views to the research, but did not receive a response. They were first emailed after I obtained contact details from a long-term participant at the beginning of 2023, and then again a few months later. Other than the possibility that they were preoccupied with work commitments, I suspect that the study's stated focus on the views and experiences of taxicab drivers themselves, the well-known nature of power relations between these drivers and their councils, and heated political conflict around a certain controversy at the time may all have contributed to this lack of response. Nonetheless, I acknowledge that the absence of a viewpoint from local authorities amounts to a limitation of this thesis – one that I hope to remedy in future work.

The last issue that needs to be addressed in this series of chapters on methodology is that of reflexivity, and how it constituted a continual task – one that also influenced the decision to employ an autoethnographic narrative scheme in this chapter. Doing so makes it clear that the stories told, the research questions pursued and ultimately the arguments put forth in this thesis are all marked by a degree of selectivity, thus leaving them open to critique and revision. Throughout the eleven months I was in the field, I remained attentive to 'points of connection and *disconnection*' (Kalra, 2000, p. 40; emphasis in original) between me and my participants. My multiple positionalities – most notably as a researcher affiliated with Durham University, a Pakistani, and an Urdu and Punjabi speaker – inevitably impacted on the way participants perceived and related to me, and the level of access subsequently attained. In this context, I experienced insider/outsider status as being a continuum rather than a dichotomy (Humphrey,

2007) – one that varied across different participants, by the topic discussed in a given moment, type of engagement [e.g., ride-along versus interview at a fixed location] and also over time. In particular, whilst navigating the ‘asymmetrical power relations’ between the positionalities of the researcher and the researched, I drew upon STS theories of care in pursuing an ‘ethico-political’ obligation (de la Bellacasa, 2011, p. 90) to maintain and foster, over time, a ‘relation in the face of [my participants’ own] power struggles...an alignment towards a common goal, a way of coordinating action based on shared values or virtues’ (Liboiron, 2016, p. 69). It was partly owed to this obligation that I first changed the focus of the study, and then embarked on an abductive process that progressively led me toward the viewpoint of the two ‘planes’ of relationality, both of which constituted distinct, yet important, struggles for my participants.

The continuum of insider-outsider status mentioned above was encountered as follows. Whereas my positionalities as a Pakistani and Urdu and Punjabi speaker helped in getting through to Asian participants, my affiliation with locally renowned Durham University was instrumental in establishing rapport with White English participants. The impact of the language[s] in which interviews were conducted cannot be understated: although the vast majority were in English alone, one ride-along interview with a Pakistani PHV (Uber) driver was entirely in Punjabi, and multiple interviews with British Asian, Pakistani and Indian participants involved intermittent usage of Urdu and Punjabi phrases. Speaking these languages with these participants enabled them to relate to me as ‘one of us’ [*apne* in Urdu/Punjabi], and ease into the conversation much quicker than they presumably would have otherwise. Relatedly, another positionality that may have been at play in engagements with White English participants was the *manner* in which I spoke English: while it may have impeded the ability to relate to some extent, had I spoken with a more noticeable ‘Asian’ or ‘foreign’ accent, I imagine they could have perceived me differently from how they actually did.

On the other hand, my positionalities as an upper-middle class Pakistani and a PhD researcher were points of disconnection with British Asian, Pakistani and Indian participants. For example, when I interviewed a PHV (Uber) driver who was a first-generation Pakistani migrant, I was speaking to someone who had little choice but to work in either the taxicab trade or a corner shop after he came to the UK, and in whose community it is extremely rare to see people pursuing a career in academia, particularly in the social sciences. Being an academic researcher likewise put some distance between me and White English participants of a working class background, although in that case my positionalities as a Pakistani and a first-generation migrant were further points of disconnection, especially with respect to their knowledge of and affective attachments to the history of their communities.

With long-term participants, the impact of these positionalities was seen to somewhat diminish as rapport increased and mutual trust was established. However, this happened first for discussions on ‘matters of the trade’, and only later for those relating to group tensions, which required a higher degree of trust. This phased manner of obtaining access came to be reflected in the amount of data collected, and later the analysis undertaken, of the two ‘planes’ of relationality examined in this thesis.

### 4.3. Research Questions

#### ***Critical Operations and Moral Regimes***

- i. In what ways do participants critique the shifting economic ordering of the taxicab trade?
- ii. What actors, objects and activities come to be implicated in these critiques?
- iii. How do these critiques affirm, contest and/or recast virtues from the *industrial*, *market* and/or *connexionist* orders of worth?
- iv. In the absence of a worthy qualification in terms of one of these orders, what compromises support justify continued engagement in their work activity?

#### ***Figurational Relations***

- i. How are figurational relations between the White English and British Asians, and between British Asians and ‘newer’ outsider groups, marked by the mobilisation of *group charisma* and *group disgrace*?
- ii. What are the affective consequences of the attachment of group disgrace for the members of the outsider groups concerned?
- iii. In what ways do these different articulations of group disgrace relate to the process of racialisation?



#### 4.4. Table of Participants

To close this series of chapters on methodology, I provide a table of participants and their attributes, inclusive of: alias; ethnicity; gender; age group; whether they joined the taxicab trade before or after the arrival of Uber in 2012 [‘pre or post Uber’]; years of experience in the trade; licensing authority; mode of participation; number of in-person engagements; and number of total engagements. Aliases were chosen based on participants’ communal group or ethnicity, such as White English, British Asian, Indian, Pakistani, Nigerian, etc. In order to preclude the need to ask participants about their age directly, they were asked to indicate which of three following age groups they belonged to: 25 to 40 years old, 40 to 55 years, or over 55 years. The rationale behind the selection of these groups was to ensure representation of full-time taxicab drivers in different phases of the life course. As for the total number of engagements, it includes in-person engagements, phone calls and email exchanges; however, any exchanges of text messages or on social media have been excluded, as these could not be accurately collated. Participants are listed in the order they were recruited during fieldwork [from first to last].

| Name (alias) | Ethnicity               | Gender | Age group | Pre or post Uber | Years of experience | Licensing authority/area        | Regulatory category                                 | Mode of participation | No. of engagements (in-person) | No. of engagements (total) |
|--------------|-------------------------|--------|-----------|------------------|---------------------|---------------------------------|---|-----------------------|--------------------------------|----------------------------|
| Alistair     | White British           | M      | 55+       | post             | 7                   | Durham                          | Hackney carriage                                    | In-person             | 12                             | 14                         |
| Darlene      | White British           | F      | 40-55     | post             | 9                   | Durham                          | Hackney carriage                                    | In-person             | 7                              | 7                          |
| David        | White British           | M      | 25-40     | pre              | 16                  | Durham                          | PHV: own operator + PHV: Uber (ex hackney carriage) | In-person             | 22                             | 22                         |
| Kieran       | White British           | M      | 25-40     | pre              | 5                   | Newcastle                       | PHV: local operator (manager)                       | In-person             | 1                              | 2                          |
| Ali          | British Asian (2nd gen) | M      | 40-55     | pre              | 31                  | Newcastle                       | Hackney carriage                                    | In-person             | 6                              | 14                         |
| Asim         | British Asian (2nd gen) | M      | 25-40     | post             | 5                   | Newcastle (lives in Sunderland) | PHV: Uber   | In-person             | 2                              | 5                          |
| Obi          | Nigerian                | M      | 25-40     | post             | 4                   | Newcastle                       | PHV: Uber   | In-person             | 2                              | 4                          |
| Akshay       | Indian                  | M      | 40-55     | post             | 4                   | Sunderland                      | PHV: Uber   | Phone                 | 0                              | 1                          |
| Irene        | White British           | F      | 40-55     | pre              | 3                   | Darlington                      | PHV: local operator (retired)                       | In-person             | 1                              | 1                          |
| Alec         | White British           | M      | 55+       | pre              | 35                  | London                          | Hackney carriage                                    | Phone                 | 0                              | 4                          |
| Tom          | White British           | M      | 40-55     | post             | 5                   | South East England              | Hackney carriage + PHV: Uber                        | Online (Twitter)      | 0                              | 1                          |
| Ahmet        | Iranian                 | M      | 25-40     | post             | 1                   | Newcastle                       | PHV: Uber   | In-person             | 1                              | 1                          |
| Martin       | White British           | M      | 40-55     | post             | 7                   | Newcastle                       | PHV: Uber + PHV: local operator                     | In-person             | 1                              | 1                          |
| Jack         | White British           | M      | 25-40     | post             | 0.5 (6 months)      | Newcastle                       | PHV: Uber   | In-person             | 1                              | 1                          |
| Ajay         | Indian                  | M      | 40-55     | post             | 5                   | Newcastle                       | PHV: Uber   | In-person             | 1                              | 1                          |
| Aziz         | Pakistani               | M      | 25-40     | post             | 3                   | Newcastle                       | PHV: Uber   | In-person             | 1                              | 1                          |
| Zubair       | Pakistani               | M      | 40-55     | post             | 3                   | Newcastle                       | PHV: Uber   | In-person             | 1                              | 1                          |
| Sajjad       | British Asian (1st gen) | M      | 55+       | pre              | 29                  | [redacted]                      | Hackney carriage                                    | In-person             | 2                              | 4                          |
| Dan          | White British           | M      | 55+       | pre              | 37                  | Newcastle                       | Hackney carriage + PHV: local operator              | In-person             | 1                              | 2                          |
| Osman        | British Asian (2nd gen) | M      | 55+       | pre              | 35                  | Newcastle                       | Hackney carriage + PHV: local operator              | In-person             | 2                              | 5                          |
|              |                         |        |           |                  |                     |                                 |   |                       | 64                             | 92                         |

Figure 7: Table of Participants

**Part V: Findings**

## **5.1. ‘The Unruly Coachman is Back’: Painful Losses of Industrial Worth in the Hackney Carriage Sector**

### ***Standards, Implements and Professional Qualifications***

On 5 October 2022, I met British Asian Newcastle hackney carriage driver Ali at an Indian takeaway in Gateshead. Our meeting was scheduled on short notice. I received a call from him at around 10am in the morning and readily agreed to his proposal to meet in the same afternoon, only a couple of hours later. He told me to take the train to Newcastle station and then give him a call. When I did, I was told that a taxi [with a certain license plate number] would be picking me up in five minutes, and taking me across the Tyne to his ‘office’ in Gateshead. A twenty-minute journey later, I saw a slim, middle-aged Asian man, wearing a hoodie and casual trousers, waiting for me outside this location, which was in an industrial estate in Gateshead. After having a brief but what appeared to be a warm and humorous chat with the driver I had come with – a White English hackney – he introduced himself to me in a recognisably Geordie accent, and began talking about his morning at the ‘office’, which was actually a storage location for imported branded tools that he collects as a hobbyist and sometimes sells locally. Shortly afterwards he asked me, ‘Would you like some food? I know a place a quick 5 minutes’ drive away that I think you’ll like. Authentic stuff. Let’s go.’ And off we went in his cab to a small Asian takeaway, a place that, unbeknownst to me, would become one of the key sites for my PhD fieldwork.

I begin my analysis of ethnographic data with the aforementioned meeting as it makes for a good starting point to unpack a ‘matter of concern’ (Latour, 2005) that came up again and again in my meetings with hackney carriage drivers: the perceived devaluation of topographical route tests that had formed part of the licensing process for taxicab drivers for many decades, and through which they qualify their own self-worth, and identity, as ‘professional’ drivers. Ali, who subsequently became one of my long-term participants, raised this issue from the very beginning.

One of the first questions I asked him once we were at the takeaway was: ‘How have you seen the taxicab trade change over the past decade or so, especially since the arrival of Uber?’ In response, he gave me a lengthy account of how both sides of the trade [hackney and PHV] had shifted, with the key moment for him being the premiership of David Cameron. It was Cameron who had ‘scrapped the Locality Test for private hire [licensing]’, he said, and that had ‘opened the floodgates’. What had come in through these ‘floodgates’? A large number of what he saw as ‘unqualified’, ‘unprofessional’ private hire drivers who didn’t ‘speak a word of English’, and predominantly undertook work ‘on the apps’, all the while ‘staring at their sat-navs’. Clearly, the implication was that these drivers had been let in unfairly, with the judgement being premised on the scrapping of the Locality Test. It was alleged that this development happened as a result of a ‘golden handshake’ between Cameron’s government and Uber, which led to actors in the central government either encouraging, or directing, local councils to relax their licensing requirements.



**Figure 8:** Walking into an Asian takeaway in Gateshead, a key site for ethnographic fieldwork,

12 November 2022

Throughout the remainder of our meeting, which lasted well over three hours, I probed Ali on why the Locality Test held so much importance for him. The below extract sheds light on how he attributes a certain qualified worth to, and through, this test:

“Here’s a great example, okay. So it was in this takeaway. There were a couple of hack drivers, 8-9 PHV drivers, sitting and eating here just before Covid. So we got into a bit of a debate. I said to the private hires, can I ask you a couple of questions. I said to them: gentlemen, name me any two streets in Jesmond. They laughed at me. I said no, no, name me any two streets. So one of them goes, ‘Grosvenor Road, Osborne Road, Acorn Road’, something like that. So, you know where they fell, how I tricked them? What was my question? Name me any two *streets* in Jesmond. Not ten, not twelve. Any two streets. What was the answer? Grosvenor Road, Osborne Road, Jesmond Road. That is not my question: I said name me any two streets, not the roads. In fact, there are only four streets [in Jesmond]: Farquhar St, Serene St, Lamar St and Deuchar St. How do I know? *Because I studied this*. And why weren’t they able to answer it? Because they [Newcastle City Council] have dropped the Locality Test. *And this is the issue we have here. It’s about standards.*”

— Ali, Newcastle hackney carriage driver, in-person interview, 5 October 2022

Ali’s exchange with the PHV drivers in the above account illustrates an assertion of superior worth that is qualified in terms of the Locality Test as an *implement*, more specifically a *professional qualification*, that is oriented towards achieving control over the spatiotemporal articulation of the occupational form of taxicab driving in line with an *industrial* ordering of worth (Thévenot, 1984; Boltanski and Thévenot, 2006). The notion of ‘implements’ denotes tools, procedures and processes that contribute towards achieving certain kinds of equivalence: that all licensed drivers on the road will know how to navigate around the city, and that they will be able to read and communicate with the public in English, as that is the language in which the test is taken. Moreover, they form the basis of what Howard Becker (1970, p. 93) called ‘a monopoly of some esoteric and difficult body of knowledge’ – the principal means by which occupational groups of varying social status, including taxicab drivers, seek to associate themselves with the honorific

symbol of a ‘profession’. Rather than describing the characteristics of specific, high-prestige occupations, this is an abstract symbol that denotes ‘a *morally praiseworthy kind of occupational organization*’ (ibid.; emphasis added). Encapsulating a set of virtues closely aligned with the industrial order of worth, it is drawn on in society for ‘individual comparison and moral evaluation; in applying it to a particular occupation people mean to say that the occupation is morally praiseworthy just as, *in refusing to apply it to another occupation, they mean to say that it is not morally worthy of the honor*’ (Becker, 1970, p. 90; emphasis added). The extract above shows that for Newcastle hackneys, the implement of the Locality Test, and the ‘educational process’ associated with it (p. 94), comes to be enrolled in such moral evaluations: by systematically learning the geography of their city, and the fastest routes from one given location to another, they are able to lay claim to a body of knowledge that others don’t possess. As we will continue to observe across this chapter, the scrapping of such route tests in the wake of platformisation is felt as an indelible loss – one that has eroded the ability to assert, both to oneself and to others, that you’re part of a ‘profession’. That erosion, in turn, leads the hackneys towards lamenting that the ‘pride’ they took in their occupation has been ‘killed off’ – to use the terms of a long-term participant whose words appear at the very end of this chapter. Once it is recalled that taxicab driving was already a relatively low-status occupation (Davis, 1959), the affective significance of this loss becomes all the more apparent.

The accordance of worth based on implements like the Locality Test is underpinned by a series of statutes [the 1847, 1976 and 1985 Acts; see Chapter 2.1] that constituted the overall regulatory framework for taxicab driving in Britain, as reviewed earlier, and it is aligned with the desirability of *codification* oriented towards the higher common principle of *functional efficiency* in the industrial world. As we saw in the extract above, a corollary to the assertion of this form of worth is the levelling of a critique at those who do not possess it, and therefore, from the standpoint of this world, find themselves in a state of unworthiness. Interestingly, very shortly

after Ali recalled the above account, a PHV driver entered the takeaway and took a seat not far from our table<sup>53</sup>. He seemed to be giving directions on the phone to someone, and a few minutes later, another PHV driver walked in. Perhaps prompted by the discussion we were engaged in, or by overhearing the first driver giving directions, Ali made a friendly-yet-stinging retort at the second driver after he had taken a seat: *'no wonder you got lost!'* Such utterances would arise again and again in my engagements with Ali, making it clear that the removal of the Locality Test for PHV drivers in Newcastle was something that he viewed as a grave injustice – any reminder of which could easily make him irate.



**Figure 9:** Hackney carriages queued up outside Central Station, Newcastle, 5 October 2022

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<sup>53</sup> There are only three tables at this small takeaway.



In addition to a critique of those who do not possess industrial worth in terms of the Locality Test as an implement or professional qualification, Ali also mounted a critique of local government officials, who – by scrapping the requirement for this test – had undermined the occupational form that he values. This critique needs to be seen in the context of Ali's mention of a 'golden handshake' between David Cameron and Uber, which he alleged was the 'real' reason behind local authorities easing their licensing requirements. If we focus specifically on this implication of actors in the central government, Ali was undertaking the critical operation of *unveiling*, whereby aggrieved beings 'call attention to the presence, in the situation that was unfavourable to them, of beings that *do not belong* to the world in which the [reality] test has to be set up in order to be valid...beings of a different nature whose intervention introduces *worths that are foreign to the test, thus rendering the test invalid*' (Boltanski and Thévenot, 2006, p. 217; emphasis added). The test here may be said to concern whether or not the relaxed licensing regime for taxicab driving is still valid from the standpoint of the *industrial* world, on which Ali's verdict was negative. In denouncing the alleged 'golden handshake', he sought to disqualify the worth attached to *personal connections* in a *connexionist* form of coordination (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005). From the standpoint of the industrial order that he identified with, such connections should have been unable to influence a codified occupational form, any changes to which must come through formal, institutional means [i.e., autonomous deliberation on a local level], and must clearly advance the ideal of *functional efficiency* that underpins that form. The reasons he attributed to the scrapping of the Locality Test therefore indicate that a gap had opened up between an *ideal* construction tied to an industrial ordering of worth on one end, and the *reality* of the state of relations in which he found himself on the other, in which another ordering of worth – a *connexionist* one – had seemingly prevailed. Such gaps are precisely where critiques arise (Barthe et al., 2013, p. 20). Here, then, we encounter the first instance of a clash between two different orders of worth in the context of the shifting economic ordering of the taxicab trade, with more such clashes to be seen in the current as well as the succeeding two chapters.

Ali was far from the only participant who expressed indignation at what he viewed as a lowering of standards, and consequently a decline in functional efficiency, in the taxicab trade. A close variation of the same theme arose repeatedly in my engagements with Alistair, a Durham-based long-term participant who had been a hackney carriage driver for over a decade. In several of our regular biweekly coffee meetings in Durham town centre, Alistair described himself as an ‘advanced’, ‘professional’ driver, almost always following it up with a critique of those who were not qualified as such. For example:

“I’m a professional driver. I’m a member of the Institute of Advanced Motorists, I have been for 40 odd years, and I am horrified at the standard of some of the [taxicab] drivers. I’m horrified at some thirty-year veteran hackney drivers too you know, but more so with private hire. I mean, driving the wrong way on a one-way street. You know this is a one-way street? ‘Yeah but I’m an Uber!’ You’re parked on a pedestrian crossing, on zig zag lines. ‘Yeah I’m an Uber!’”

— Alistair, Durham hackney carriage driver, in-person interview, 8 December 2022

Alistair’s affiliation with the Institute of Advanced Motorists adds a further layer to how hackney carriage drivers like himself – those with several years of experience in the trade – qualify themselves as ‘professional’ drivers. In addition to the learning required for topographical route tests, drivers like him pursue additional courses offered by automobility organisations, which further reinforce their view that they can drive to a standard others don’t possess. Ali, too, was affiliated with the same organisation, and had additionally held driving certifications issued by the Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents [RoSPA]. The latter are issued after an advanced driving test, are graded [e.g., gold, bronze], and require a retest every three years. Because of holding these certifications, Ali had previously been an ‘advanced driving instructor’ for Northumbria Police and Durham Constabulary, training their officers on high-speed pursuits [‘fast driving’, as he put it], off-roading, driving through areas with pedestrians, filtering through heavy traffic, and a range of other scenarios that they may face.

Taken together, these statements on the Locality Test, affiliations with automobility organisations, and certifications issued by those organisations all reinforce the value hackney carriage drivers place upon implements, inclusive of professional qualifications, forming part of codification oriented towards the maxim of functional efficiency in the industrial order of worth (Thévenot, 1984; Boltanski and Thévenot, 2006). The previous extract indicates that hackney carriage drivers confer value on the organising presence of this maxim in not just the UK's taxicab trade, but also in the wider assemblage of road transportation in which it is situated. Even if general conceptions of taxicab driving view it as a relatively 'low-skilled' occupation, what was observed in the course of this ethnographic study was that for a section of those working in this trade, particularly hackney carriage drivers, a moral vocabulary of skills, professionalism, and standards aligned with an industrial form of coordination was, in fact, integral to how they saw themselves and their work activity.

Beyond the assertion of him being an 'advanced driver', and thus possessing expertise that is valued in the industrial order, Alistair's statement also levelled a critique at the driving practices of Uber drivers. While Ali was irate at the scrapping of the Locality Test, Alistair was disturbed by witnessing everyday instances of Uber drivers breaking road traffic laws – a pattern that for him betrayed the growing prevalence of an inadequate standard of driving that fell short of the ideal of functional efficiency. For drivers like him, *this* is the ideal along which the embodied activity of driving a taxi, the taxicab occupation, as well as road transport more broadly, ought to be organised. As the below extract from another of our coffee meetings shows, he aligns himself strongly with this ideal even as he acknowledges the presence of other ideals, those that underpin a different ordering of worth:

"The primary function of the licensed taxi driver, whether you're private hire or you're hackney, is the safety and comfort of your passengers. *The primary function isn't to make money, it isn't to run a business* – that [safety] is the primary function, and that's the word in every licensing area,

somewhere in that code of conduct. *You've got to follow that code of conduct.* The practices of Uber drivers in Durham city, and I know other places as well, worry me. Whether it be the continual dropping off of passengers on a pedestrian crossing, allowing passengers to exit your vehicle in the middle of a busy road, picking passengers up on a pedestrian crossing, picking them up on a roundabout. That's not safe to do. You're not ensuring the safety and comfort of your passengers. And that's my issue, predominantly, with the private hire drivers, those *out-of-town vehicles* you know, who are Newcastle-registered.”

— Alistair, Durham hackney carriage driver, in-person interview, 20 January 2023

In addition to providing more detail on the practices of Uber drivers that are seen as controversial, this statement contains an *industrial* critique of a *market* ordering of worth: taxicab driving is *not* about money, says Alistair, but rather about the safety of passengers<sup>54</sup> – that is the primary *function* of the *licensed* taxi driver. By indexing taxicab drivers' work activity to a 'code of conduct' for licensees, Alistair's statement firmly emplaces that activity in an industrial ordering of worth. In the same vein, it implies that Uber drivers' rule-breaking reveals their alignment with another ordering of worth – one that prioritises making money without any regard to that 'code of conduct'. By providing a framework of rules, such a code of conduct supports an ordering of economic activity that exhibits 'probable relations' in a 'technically predictable universe' (Boltanski and Thévenot, 2006, pp. 210-11) – a universe wherein functional efficiency can be reliably attained. At the same time, it also plays the role of a 'code of ethics', one of the core characteristics of the abstract symbol of a 'profession'; by encouraging altruism and denouncing purely selfish motives, it enables practitioners to claim that their work activity is oriented above all to the good of the clients (Becker, 1970, p. 95). Both these aspects of an industrial-oriented

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<sup>54</sup> This invocation of public safety should be situated in the longer history of codification of the hackney carriage trade; it is helpful to recall a chapter in Part I of the thesis ['Enter the Hackneys'] where I reviewed the introduction of *An Act for the lycenseing and regulateing Hackney-Coaches and Stage-Coaches 1694*, an early attempt at regulating the hackney trade that was driven partly by the motive of protecting the travelling public, and which set into motion the characterisation of hackney carriages as being a 'public' form of transport.

economic ordering are seen to be undermined by the rise of app-based platform work, leading to the emergence of critical operations like the one seen above.

### ***Investments in An Occupational Form***

Having addressed the role of implements and professional qualifications in the ‘taxi world’ inhabited by hackney carriage drivers, I now turn to another, closely related theme that came up in my conversations with them: their valuation of investments in an occupational form. Although the notion of *investments in forms* refers to costly procedures aimed at ‘[establishing] a stable relation with a certain lifespan’ (Thévenot, 1984, p. 8), for instance the requirement for taxicab drivers to be licensed, personal investments made in such procedures – of time, effort and money – play a crucial role in their stabilisation over time. In this sense, their operation is *multi-scalar* in nature: every instance of a driver personally investing in their occupational form acquires meaning and affective force in relation to, but at the same time reproduces, the historical temporality of investments made in that form. The latter aspect illuminates why such investments comprise one of the key mechanisms through which the formation of an ‘occupational identity’ takes place (Becker and Carper, 1956, p. 296).

Certain investments of this kind can already be discerned in the extracts discussed above, for example Ali highlighting that he ‘studied’ for the Locality Test. In one of our subsequent meetings, he likened investments in such licensing requirements, through which hackney carriage drivers corroborate their identity as professional drivers, to the time and effort I was investing in my PhD:

Ali: “You tell me, you work hard for your PhD, right. How many years will it be, four years?”

Salman: “Three to four.”

Ali: “Okay, let’s say four, nice even number. *And then someone comes along and says, because they’ve found a loophole law: right, we can do a PhD in a year now!* You see my angle?”

— Interview exchange at Ali's home, Gateshead, 12 November 2022

The 'loophole law' referred to by Ali was the omission of the Locality Test, which – despite being formally enacted by the Council – was deemed illegitimate. According to him and another Newcastle hackney, Osman, the justification put forth by the Council for this decision was the widespread availability of satellite navigation ['sat-nav'], which presumably rendered the knowledge acquired for a topographical route test obsolete. That the move coincided with the introduction of the Uber app, which for the first time integrated sat-nav within its user interface, buttressed the Council's argument on one end, but raised suspicions on the other. The hackneys continued to assert that these technological developments do *not* make up for the knowledge they had acquired, which not only allows them to work out the fastest route for a range of journeys, but also quickly adapt to any unforeseen circumstances – road closures, traffic jams, accidents – that may not register on the sat-nav straight away. Some of them made the former point by demonstrating how certain routes given by Google Maps or Waze were not the quickest, just the most straightforward – tending to major roads that were prone to traffic jams. But beyond devaluing this reserve of navigational skills, the Council's decision was also seen to dismantle an 'investment mechanism' (Becker and Carper, 1956) that formed the basis of identification with an occupational form. This, then, was the second sense in which Ali used the phrase 'loophole law': those who had not undertaken the investment required for this test could not claim to be 'professional' taxicab drivers.

Another example that brings forth how the sacrifice of investments in an occupational form comes to be enrolled in critical operations pertains to what is perhaps the most famous of professional qualifications for taxicab drivers: the Knowledge of London. In the second half of my ethnographic fieldwork, I had a detailed phone conversation with a veteran London black cab driver, Alec, part of which demonstrates how the aforementioned distinction of 'professional' status is justified based on years-long investments made in passing the Knowledge:

*“Driving a black cab is very much a profession, whereas Uber is transitory. It took me 3 years to do the Knowledge, which is really like a university degree. And now 35 years I’ve been in the streets of London...[ ]...[In comparison] once you start as an Uber driver, you’re on the first step of the ladder of employment, which is why that’s taken up by people who’ve just arrived in the country.”*

— Alec, London hackney carriage driver, phone interview, 6 April 2023

In equating the Knowledge to a university degree, Alec accords hackney carriage drivers like himself a form of industrial worth that stems from the costly personal investments it requires. Any applicant aspiring to complete this qualification must commit to memory routes spanning over 25,000 streets in a 6-mile radius around Charing Cross in Central London, and then demonstrate that navigational ability in a series of oral exams where they are asked to call a number of ‘runs’, each requiring them to map the quickest route from one specific ‘point’ in the city to another (Rosen, 2014; see also Robertson, 2023). Both the logic underpinning both the manner in which students of the Knowledge gradually master their runs<sup>55</sup>, as well as how the actual oral examinations are structured, is one where making ‘progress’ over time is the ‘investment formula’, as it is for investments in the industrial order of worth (Boltanski and Thévenot, 2006, p. 208). Relatedly, the systematic-yet-instinctual navigational ability assessed by this fabled test sets up a claim that the monopoly over knowledge it confers ‘consists not of technical skills and the fruits of practical experience but, rather, of *abstract principles arrived at by scientific research and logical analysis*’ (Becker, 1970, p. 94) – as is the case for a ‘profession’.

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<sup>55</sup> ‘Knowledge boys’ and ‘Knowledge girls’ can sometimes be spotted riding their mopeds on the roads of London, with maps of the capital fastened on their windscreens, practising different runs along a learning journey that on average takes a duration of three years. Once they begin the examination process, their performance in each ‘appearance’ [i.e., oral exam] determines the number of days that must lapse before the next one (Rosen, 2014).

### ***The Affective Life of Investments in Form***

In the preceding section, we have examined two separate accounts that demonstrate the manner in which the devaluation of personal investments in pathways or ‘mechanisms’ provided by a codified occupational form, for instance implements like topographical route tests, constitutes a certain kind of ‘practical contradiction’ that gives rise to critical operations (Barthe et al., 2013). Taken together, these implements and the investments made in them support forms of equivalence both in terms of drivers’ navigational skills and ability to speak English, as noted earlier, as well as the assertion of a certain level of altruistic ‘commitment’ to their ‘profession’ (Becker, 1970), owing to the time and effort they would have necessarily expended in passing the route tests, or alternatively, completing the process<sup>56</sup> of qualifying as a licensed driver. These forms of equivalence – premised on costly investments in a codified occupational form – then come to be enrolled into critiques whereby industrial worth is *denied* to those who have not undertaken them, and thus stand outside the realm of that form. As seen in Alec’s statement above, contestations over the ability to claim association with the honorific symbol of a ‘profession’ were part and parcel of these critiques.

Thus far, our focus has been on the ways in which investments in an occupational form came to be enrolled in the critical activity of participants. Their accounts of these investments were critical in the sense that they repeatedly invoked virtues from the industrial order of worth [e.g., *professional qualifications*, *functional efficiency*] in justifying – to me, themselves and others – why they valued them so much. Such reflexive moves however do not erase that the investments in question had an *affective* force, which underlay and charged the undertaking of critical operations. Taking this affective dimension into account underlines that ‘reflexivity’ is never devoid of affect; rather, in the manner it is conceptualised here, it is indexed solely to

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<sup>56</sup> Osman, a hackney carriage driver licensed in 1988 in Newcastle, emphasised to me that in order to complete this process, he had to sign a declaration that taxi driving will be his ‘only source of income’. That this is not required any more is taken as an erosion of ‘commitment’ to the profession.



whether or not actors are striving for equivalence, or in other words detaching from purely strategic battles in moving to a ‘higher level of generality’ (Boltanski and Thévenot, 2006). In this sense, it denotes an affective articulation oriented toward equivalence. I have already noted that personal investments in licensing processes establish an affective pathway to longer, cumulative investments in the occupational form of the centuries-old hackney carriage trade, besides extending the ‘area of validity’ of that form (Thévenot, 1984, p. 24). This pathway goes hand in hand with the cultivation of an ‘occupational identity’ (Becker and Carper, 1956) as well as claims that one’s occupation rises up to the honorific symbol of a ‘profession’ (Becker, 1970) – a collective entity whose historical moves in that direction can be readily traced.

In order to go further in dissecting how investments in form are *also* ‘affective investments’ (Grossberg, 1992), it is helpful to engage with a few salient observations from Bissell’s (2022) account of how Australian taxi drivers reckoned with lost investments in the wake of disruptive techno-economic change – a story not too dissimilar to the one being narrated here. Albeit the losses experienced by my participants did not have a financial component of the kind investigated by Bissell, in the sense of a free-fall devaluation of licenses<sup>57</sup> held under a regulatory regime that fuelled ‘medallion capitalism’ (Tucker, 2018), they were nevertheless linked to a diminution of income that can be earned from working as a hackney carriage license holder: the removal of implements like the Locality Test leads to more PHV (Uber) drivers, which intensifies market competition, reduces the hackneys’ market share, and in that sense devalues the license. Since participants did not accord as much primacy to this financial aspect in their reflexive

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<sup>57</sup> Some Durham-based participants, like Alistair and David, did narrate witnessing a similar crash back in 2008, when a number of smaller licensing authorities in County Durham were merged into one, making the value of hackney carriage licenses in the formerly central authority of City of Durham fall from around £35,000 to £300 ‘overnight’; however, they were not affected by this directly. In Newcastle, as in other cities of the UK, rental income from hackney licenses did exist but had always been of a much smaller scale than that seen in Australia (Bissell, 2022), Canada (Tucker, 2018) or New York (Matthew, 2005), and was not mentioned by any of my participants.

accounts, their case provides us with a fruitful opportunity to further probe the affective dimension of these investments.

Of the three lost affective investments discussed by Bissell (2022), it is ‘a loss of *face* in terms of respect from the public’ (p. 489) that is particularly relevant to my participants’ accounts. This ‘respect’ had always been justified to third parties based on investments in an occupational form, which effectively served as an outlet to industrial worth for those who could be said to be at the very margins of that world. For the hackneys, the importance of this outlet to their own self-image was such that it had congealed into an attachment, as aligned with Anderson’s definition of ‘trajectories that *bring closer* a promissory object, closer but rarely fully present’ (2023, p. 406; emphasis in original). The promissory object that concerns us here in particular is the continued ability to assert and *qualify* your worth to others – for instance, that you are a ‘professional’ driver. That the ‘proof and material supports’ (Barthe et al., 2013) that underpinned this qualification, like route test requirements, have been eroded and/or devalued, is more than just a moral-practical contradiction – it is also experienced as a painful diminution of the *promise* of a continued outlet to industrial worth. It spurs critiques for both these reasons.

Often accompanied by affects of anger, disbelief, but also pride, these critiques illustrated how the withdrawn promise continued to be sought out by hackney carriage drivers. In this sense, their attributions of industrial worth to themselves and what they thought of as their *beruf* were not just integral to their self-image, but also formed part of their *vitality*, in the Spinozist sense of active rather than passive affections (Deleuze, 1978). So whereas Bissell (2022), after spending time with his interlocuters, argued that ‘relinquishing depleting investments’ may be necessary for ‘creating new capacities to feel differently, to finally move on’ (p. 490), I would assert that for my participants, these investments were so crucial for their self-image and vitality that detaching from them may *not* be affirming. What they reveal, instead, is a dilemmatic situation whereby the line between active and passive affects is continually blurred: they are at once damaging *and*

enlivening, as is sometimes the case for enduring attachments (Ahmed, 2004; Berlant, 2011; Hennion, 2017; Anderson, 2023). That Newcastle-based hackney Ali remarked that ‘there’s no *maza* [pleasure] without *gham* [sorrow]’ when asked why he continued to organise against continuing platformisation and deregulation exemplified this particularly well. This endurance of an attachment to the promise of industrial worth helps understand why the responses seen in these participants to a reality deemed unjust somewhat resembled what Goffman (1952), in discussing different adaptations to failure in substantiating one’s self-image, referred to as ‘stalling’: ‘When the mark is stalled, he is given a chance to become familiar with the new conception of self he will have to accept *before he is absolutely sure that he will have to accept it*’ (p. 458). Holding on to their attachment, it was in an elongated version of the latter state that hackney carriage drivers found themselves. We will see in the following chapter on the market order that this adaptation differed from those seen in PHV (Uber) drivers, to the unique difficulties they faced in qualifying their own self-worth.

“It was an emotional moment,” McCabe said. “It was hard to hold back the tears. Three years of complete financial stress, family stress — studying for 13 hours a day, seven days a week. Suddenly, the whole thing was very casual. It was quite, you know, ‘Sit back, relax, loosen your tie.’ And then Mr. O’Connor was telling me what to expect doing the job. He was giving me his inside knowledge after being a London cabbie for, like, 20-odd years.” McCabe went home to his family. He and his wife, Katie, ordered take-out from a Thai restaurant, put on loud music, and danced around the house with their children. When the kids went to bed, the McCabes drank a few beers and dismantled the Knowledge library: stored the flashcards and pages of notes, took the maps off the wall. Katie, McCabe said, “cried for about two days solid.”

**Figure 10:** Extract from Judy Rosen’s (2014) article in *The New York Times*, in which London black cab driver Matt McCabe recounts the moment he finally completed the Knowledge of London

### ***Control as Relation of Worth: Enforcement***

In the first two sections of this chapter, I examined extracts in which a number of hackney carriage participants could be seen to attribute as well as deny worth on the basis of two key features of the *industrial* order of worth: *implements* like topographical route tests, and *investments in form*. I

then delved into the affective dimension of investments in form, in order to highlight how reflexivity, far from denoting a minimisation of affective flows, remains infused with them; this is an observation that relates to a number of findings in this and the subsequent two chapters, even if the ‘rationalist view’ (Susen, 2014) of the orders of worth framework means that it is not able to be continually foregrounded. I now turn towards a set of extracts which demonstrate how hackney carriage participants mobilised an industrial mode of justification in the wake of what they saw as an unravelling of *control mechanisms* tied to their occupational form. I begin by discussing a ‘matter of concern’ (Latour, 2005) whose importance was particularly pronounced in Durham: lax or inadequate enforcement of taxicab regulations. At its core, this issue relates to spot checks, patrols and other compliance operations carried out by local authority licensing officers with support from the police, and whether or not these are seen to be effective in stamping out contraventions of taxicab regulations.

Such contraventions may include the presence of unlicensed taxis, taxis with incorrect insurance, overcharging by tampering with the meter, arbitrarily refusing fares, PHVs hailing fares without a prebooking, and so forth. Each of them hinders the ideal of ‘probable relations’ in the industrial world, which is why effective control mechanisms are so important; as Boltanski and Thévenot (2006) say, it is ‘in a relation of *control* that the state of worthiness encompasses the state of unworthiness’ (p. 208) in this world. We saw earlier how Alistair takes issue with certain practices of Uber drivers, for instance picking up customers on roundabouts, which are seen as violations of the ‘code of conduct’. In further conversations with him as well as another Durham hackney carriage driver, Darlene, I also came across strong criticisms of rule violations by hackney carriage drivers *themselves*. The extract below pertains to a practice that taxi drivers refer to as ‘cherry picking’ [‘brooming’ in London], whereby the driver at the front of a rank refuses a fare for illegitimate reasons:

“My number one concern with the council is enforcement. You’ve got drivers refusing fares, it happens all the time and they [the Council] don’t do anything about it. It’s ridiculous. Like just the other night, it was four cars in front of us [at the rank] and a man came [to my taxi] and said ‘they won’t take us’, all of them [drivers at the front] said that they don’t have a card machine when this Chinese [man] was trying to get in. You do! I mean if he was going to Newcastle you’d pull your card machine out. And when you confront them they go like ‘ohhh, uhhh’. *And then you wonder why Uber’s winning.*”

— Darlene, Durham hackney carriage driver, in-person interview, 3 February 2023

Darlene’s account of ‘cherry picking’ at the rank is interesting as it tells us that hackney carriage drivers take issue with the flouting of regulations not just by Uber drivers, but also by a section of their own colleagues, who are seen to be undermining their occupational form *from the inside*. In the first instance, these actions defeat the purpose of queueing at the taxi rank, which is supposed to facilitate an equitable, *efficient* distribution of fares. Additionally, refusing to take a fare by lying about not having a card machine, or in other cases by saying you’re waiting for a prebooked passenger, amounts to unethical practice that violates the ‘code of conduct’ for licensed drivers. Hackney carriage participants’ impassioned critiques of these violations, and of those who engage in them, illustrate how they value the utilisation of ‘the police power of the state’ in upholding their occupational form – not just through the ‘device of licensure procedures’ to control market entry, but also enforcement of a ‘code of ethics’ by ‘appropriate disciplinary bodies’ (Becker, 1970, pp. 94-95). These expectations are drawn from their continued affiliation with the abstract symbol of a ‘profession’, and are indicative of how these drivers tend to mobilise an industrial mode of justification when everyday disputes relating to their work activity arise.

Both Darlene and Alistair were disillusioned by the weak state of enforcement operations in Durham because it was seen to be enabling various rule violations, whether they be by Uber drivers or hackney carriage drivers themselves:

"But nobody does challenge them [Uber drivers 'illegally' parking on zig-zag lines]. We have a virtual police force here in Durham, *we have a virtual enforcement team*. Nobody does challenge them. And it's annoying. I used to be compliance manager [before becoming a taxi driver]. *Follow the rules. Just follow the rules!*"

— Alistair, Durham hackney carriage driver, in-person interview, 20 January 2023

Alistair's description of there being only a 'virtual' enforcement presence in Durham was replicated in accounts given by all other Durham-based or Durham-licensed participants. These included Darlene; David, a PHV driver who had previously held a hackney badge; and Osman, who primarily worked as a hackney carriage driver in Newcastle but also held another badge for driving a separate, Durham-licensed hackney carriage. In one of our interview engagements, Osman told me: 'I've had a Durham badge for 27 years, and I've not met an enforcement officer in the last few years'. Given that taxicab enforcement powers are vested in the same officers who are responsible for ensuring compliance by pubs, nightclubs and other hospitality venues, all these observations may be said to be supported by a recent article published by the BBC which likened Durham's nightlife to the 'Wild West' (*BBC News*, 2024).



**Figure 11:** Fieldwork on a busy Saturday night at the Prince Bishops taxi rank, Durham,  
Saturday 11 February 2023



**Figure 12:** A PHV with a green, Newcastle license plate parked on zig-zag lines near a pedestrian  
crossing, Durham, Saturday 11 February 2023

While the presence of enforcement teams was found to be especially weak in Durham, thus making it an issue that was particularly pronounced there, participants' views on the *effectiveness* of enforcement efforts was a wider matter, for it could not be understood without also taking into account the controversial practice of 'cross-border hire'. Coming to the fore shortly after Uber arrived in the UK, this practice has blurred spatial boundaries between licensing authorities throughout the country, resulting in the weakening of licensing officers' ability to exercise their powers, which are limited to drivers and vehicles in their own area. The extract below, taken from a ride-along with long-term participant David – a former hackney, now PHV driver (own operator + Uber) – provides insight into how cross-bordering has led to the emergence of what may be described as a regulatory conundrum:

"The fact that everybody knows that there is no enforcement [in Durham] is a major, major safeguarding issue, that nobody seems bothered about...[ ]...And then one of the big problems with, say, all the Newcastle cars that are working in Durham at the minute, because of Uber: *the only people who've got jurisdiction over those cars are Newcastle licensing officers, so Durham ones can't touch a Newcastle one anyway...*[ ]...And this is the thing countrywide with how taxi driving is now with Uber, all the rules have changed. *Everything that was meant to happen, all the regulation, just stopped happening.* It was just the money and the power, you know. And political interference I guess. Like nothing Uber did should've been allowed, but it was, *and they got away with it!*"

— David, Durham PHV (own operator + Uber) driver, ride-along, 22 September 2022

By linking weak enforcement of taxicab regulations in Durham to safeguarding concerns, David assumed a position on this issue that was somewhat similar to that of hackney carriage drivers: one whereby value is accorded to an industrial-oriented economic ordering that is seen to uphold not just functional efficiency, but also public safety. Shortly after indicating his alignment with this ordering, he moved from discussing the *state* of enforcement in his own locality to its overall



*effectiveness*, which he saw as a ‘countrywide’ issue. The latter, in his view, had been steadily eroded by the expansion of cross-border hire, a practice made possible by the inability of local officials to carry out enforcement checks on ‘out-of-area’ private hire vehicles and drivers: no legal provision explicitly grants them the authority to do so. If we recall hackney participant Ali’s phrase ‘loophole law’ in an earlier extract, this is another sense in which he used it: since Uber’s business model was not in harmony with the pre-existing regulatory landscape and the spatiotemporal articulation of taxicab relations tied to it, it decided to operate ‘at the edges’, in other words exploit areas where regulation was uncoded and/or absent altogether.

Now that there is a large, visible presence of PHVs undertaking cross-border work in areas like Durham, a number of participants felt like the situation is beyond repair; to put it in the words of London hackney participant Alec, ‘that horse has bolted’. I noted earlier in the thesis [Part II] that in recent court cases, like ‘Delta Merseyside Ltd & Uber Britannia Ltd v Knowsley Metropolitan Borough Council’ (2018), cross-border hire was *not* found to directly contravene the regulatory framework for taxicabs in the UK. While David did not know the details of these cases, he nevertheless characterised the practice as falling into, or exploiting, a ‘grey area’ when it came to the law. This stance was justified in terms of his first-hand experience of how the rise of cross-bordering after Uber’s entry into the local market had marked a break with the manner in which taxicab regulations were policed by local authorities in the past – up until *just before* the Silicon Valley firm arrived:

“So when Uber very, very first started in Durham. Back then, older [PHV] firms were still getting in the bother from their council for picking up in, like, *slightly* different areas. Like any sort of cross-border thing at all. People were getting prosecuted, getting fined all the time for it. *They used to come down on you like a ton of bricks!* It was always in the papers, like firms in Gateshead picking up in Newcastle or South Shields or something like that. The way things used to work is, you know, people were told that if you are registered in Newcastle, you need to ‘return to base’ and all this. And then, suddenly, all these Newcastle [private hire] cars are in Durham, doing Uber, and

there's just nobody interested, like nobody interested at all! Like literally a few weeks before [Uber arrived], any other [private hire] companies would have been doing that, *they would have been done for it. But Uber were just left to it, completely and utterly left to it...*[...] And that's what angered people the most about the way in which Uber came and took over, because they were doing *exactly* what nobody else was ever allowed to do. Like literally a few weeks before, taxi [local private hire] companies were getting prosecuted by local councils for doing *exactly* what they [Uber] were doing. And then all of a sudden it was fine, because, you know [\*throws up arm\*]."

— David, Durham PHV (own operator + Uber) driver, ride-along, 22 September 2022

In the same ride-along from which the above extract is taken, David went on to passionately criticise PHVs licensed in London working in York in the immediate years after Uber arrived, highlighting the stark difference between the geographical extent of cross-bordering in this case with that of traditional PHV operators in Tynemouth, who according to him had faced prosecution merely for picking up a 'few miles over the boundary' with Newcastle. Notably, however, he also linked anger over Uber-affiliated PHVs 'working here, there and everywhere' to the company's introduction of a 'geo-fencing' feature, which curtailed the practice to 'regions' instead of allowing it across the whole country (Uber, 2018b). A number of PHV (Uber) participants confirmed that these regions encompass multiple licensing authorities, and so leave room for cross-bordering to continue to take hold. In September 2024, as I was approaching the end of the writing-up stage of my PhD, David messaged me a link to an article in a local news outlet which described Darlington cabbies' 'fears' at increasing numbers of Newcastle-licensed PHVs 'over-saturating' the market there (Edgar, 2024). Put simply, cross-bordering vehicles had made their presence known that far south – in a new area where a sense of locality was yet to be eroded.

For those participants aligned with an industrial order of worth, or at least certain principles drawn from it, the reality that Uber's strategy to tap into cross-bordering for growing its business was met not with the activation of control mechanisms, but rather a loosening of

licensing requirements as well as spatial boundaries that had hitherto been enacted by local officials, made for a strange contradiction. David's mention of 'the money and the power...and political interference' is particularly instructive in this regard. In the current chapter, it is the second instance of an *unveiling* of beings and forms of worths that are foreign to the industrial world (Boltanski and Thévenot, 2006). This unveiling may be said to uncover the presence of the *connexionist* world ['political interference' enabled by *personal relations*], or equally, the *market* world ['money', as in *profitability*]. Yet it is different in nature to the unveiling undertaken by Ali, as discussed earlier, as well as those by several other hackney carriage participants. Whereas those participants sought to restore or reinforce the validity of different tests tied to the pre-Uber, more industrial-aligned occupational form they identified with, for example by reinstating the Locality Test as a barrier to licensing or clamping down on the 'foreign objects' of cross-bordering PHVs, my conversations with David over a span of 11 months indicated that he was opposed to such 'purification' (Boltanski and Thévenot, 2006), which he deemed not just impossible, but also undesirable. Instead, he argued for *the institution of new tests* whereby both sides of the taxicab trade – hackney and PHV – can be regulated in a manner that strikes a certain compromise (Thévenot, 2002) between all three orders of worth discerned in this study: industrial, market, and connexionist. One of the ways in which he thought this could be done was by moving licensing to a national level so it becomes uniform across licensing authorities, with no mandatory route tests, but still some amount of qualitative controls [e.g., a basic assessment of English language skills; vehicle specifications; licensing fees] aligned with the industrial order. It is partly owed to this furnishing of 'reformist' critiques (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005, p. 33) that I consider David to be among the 'deviant' cases encountered in this study. I will expand more on this characterisation in the following two chapters, where I analyse data relating to the *market* and *connexionist* orders of worth. For now, I continue dissecting participants' critiques of the contentious issue of cross-border hire.

### ***Control as Relation of Worth: Local Jurisdiction***

Whereas David did not see cross-border hire as a blatantly illegal practice, the widespread view among hackney carriage participants I spoke with was that it is, in fact, illegal. This view was premised firstly on court judgements further into the past, like ‘Blue Line Taxis v Newcastle upon Tyne City Council’ (2012), which had stated that local authority control over *all* vehicles and drivers operating in a given area was a ‘hallmark’ of taxicab regulation in the UK; hackney carriage participants therefore read these judgements as clearly indicating that ‘locality’ forms part of the design and intent of the legal codification of their occupation. Equally, it was based on the sheer disruption cross-bordering had caused to the way in which the regulatory landscape for taxicabs had functioned, in practice, for several decades. Both these justifications relate to the premium placed on the *predictability* or ‘temporal regularity’ of relations oriented toward functional efficiency in the *industrial* world (Boltanski and Thévenot, 2006, p. 211); by undermining the enactment of spatial boundaries, and as a consequence a range of controls on market entry that were set locally [e.g., vehicle specifications, route tests], cross-bordering had uprooted the predictable articulation of taxicab relations *on a local scale*. In the following extract, Osman, a veteran Newcastle hackney carriage driver who has worked in the city for over 30 years, expounds upon this valuation of locality, and then proceeds to make it the basis of critiques aimed at several features of Uber’s operations:

“Now, hackney carriage rates are set by the local authority. The private hire rates are set by each local operator. So they [the operators] can adjust the rates any way they want. But the rates that Uber do, that’s totally illegal – they should only have one rate. Set. *This ‘surge’ is illegal. Cross-border hire – illegal.* Newcastle City Council was complaining about cross-border hire years ago, they are the biggest culprits, they’ve now got more PHVs doing it than almost anybody else. I mean, the worst two authorities in the whole UK for cross-border hire in private hires is Wolverhampton, and then Newcastle. *Aap Durham ko dekh lein* [you can look at what’s happening in Durham]. And all it is for these councils, it’s a revenue spinner. There’s no safeguarding in that.”

— Osman, Newcastle hackney carriage driver, in-person interview, 13 July 2023

The first important takeaway from the above extract relates to Osman's critique of Uber's pricing. He did not see Uber as a 'local operator', even though it holds a PHV operator license in Newcastle. In contrast to prices 'set' by traditional private hire operators based locally, for whom the norm had been to employ a calibrated taximeter as a market device (Muniesa et al., 2007; McFall, 2009), Uber's algorithmically determined prices can vary between one moment and the next, between one local authority and another, and also between any two given places within a single authority. Osman saw this variability of pricing, based on instantaneous determinations of demand and supply that hold value in the *market* order of worth, as being against the design of the 'two-tier' regulatory framework and its privileging of stable relations on a local scale, leading to his determination that it is illegal. In making this determination, he aligned himself strongly with an industrial ordering of worth.

The second takeaway from his statement allows me to turn to another issue that is equally important in understanding the controversy of platformisation and Uber's rise: the rapid pace of PHV licensing since the company's entry into the UK market, which is seen as being a direct contributor to both the erosion of enforcement and the practice of cross-border hire. Osman's mention of Newcastle City Council 'complaining' about cross-bordering pertains to the court case 'Newcastle City Council v Berwick-upon-Tweed Borough Council' (2009), in which the former unsuccessfully sued the latter over its issuance of hackney carriage licenses to drivers and vehicles that had begun undertaking full-time private hire work via the Uber app in Newcastle. He contrasts this to the situation today: large numbers of Newcastle-licensed PHVs are freely undertaking cross-border work in Durham and all across the North East. Their visible presence across the region is deemed to have been facilitated by an easing of licensing requirements by Newcastle City Council, especially the removal of the Locality Test, leading to a more than threefold increase in the pace at which licenses are issued.

Yet while Newcastle-licensed PHVs are known for cross-bordering within North East England, both my fieldwork and secondary research revealed that cross-bordering by PHVs licensed by another local authority, City of Wolverhampton Council, was notorious throughout the country: from London to Manchester to here in the North East. Not only was this brought up by several of my participants, but was also regularly seen to be discussed on Facebook forums, including a large group of Uber drivers in the UK. Once I was reading through the latter group when I came across a post from someone asking whether a Wolverhampton license will allow them to work on the Uber app in Manchester, to which someone else had replied: ‘Wolves can work anywhere, even on the moon!’. Dozens of users had laugh reacted to this comment. It is important to note that Uber’s introduction of a feature that ‘geo-fenced’ the areas its drivers could work in – areas that still extend well beyond their own licensing authorities<sup>58</sup> (Uber, 2018b) – prevents Wolverhampton-licensed PHVs from working in, say, Newcastle or London. But they are still able to work for other platforms, like Bolt, as well as local private hire operators, who either allow Wolverhampton-licensed drivers to come and work for them, or license their drivers and vehicles in Wolverhampton in order to cut down on costs<sup>59</sup>.

Despite the involvement of these other platforms and local, ‘traditional’ PHV operators, it is Uber that continues to be blamed for the disconcerting presence of Wolverhampton PHVs throughout the country – a corporate actor that originally instigated the rise of cross-border hire, fuelling its expansion until it became prevalent across multiple areas of the country, and being allowed to do so due to alleged collusion with actors in higher echelons of the UK government. The extracts below, one from my conversation with veteran Newcastle hackney carriage driver Dan and another from a conversation with Alistair, provide more insight into the matter:

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<sup>58</sup> According to David, who was licensed as a PHV driver in Durham and periodically works on the Uber app, he could accept bookings in a region that extended from as far north as Northumberland down to just south of Darlington.

<sup>59</sup> Participants narrated that Blue Line Taxis in Newcastle is an example of the latter.

“The only way to stop these Wolverhampton cars from coming in is to stop cross-border hiring. But to do that, the council would have to go to court. It would have to go through Parliament as well. *It cannae just be done locally, it’s got to be done, you know, countrywide.* Right now there’s no law that clearly says: you can’t do this. That if you’re a private hire operator in Newcastle, you can’t let someone with another [out-of-area] plate come in and work for you. You know, I was passing a Wolverhampton car [while driving] the other day, a private hire, and his private hire [vehicle license] number was 22,000 summat. That means that they’ve got at least 22,000 of them out there – at least that we know of.”

— Dan, Newcastle hackney carriage driver, 28 June 2023

“There are two reasons that people [get a] license in Newcastle and Wolverhampton. *It’s cheaper,* much cheaper in Wolverhampton. *And the standards are lower.* You can get a much inferior vehicle plated in a place like Wolverhampton.”

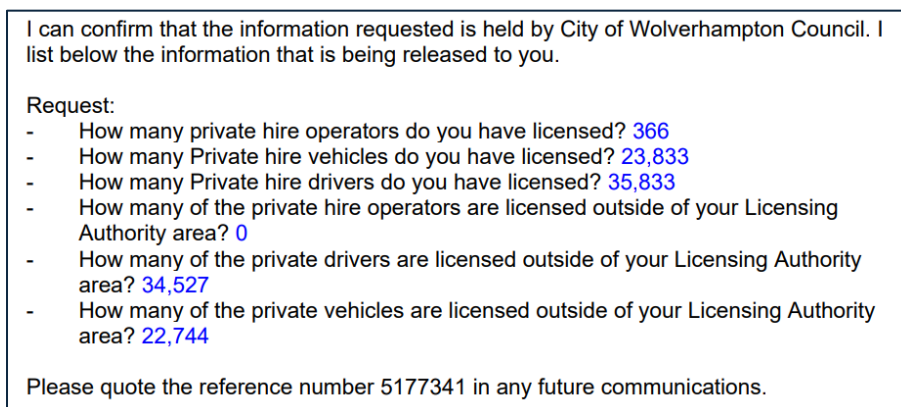
— Alistair, Durham hackney carriage driver, 9 February 2023

Let us examine each of these statements in turn. Dan connects the presence of Wolverhampton-licensed PHVs in areas like Newcastle to the absence of any clear legal provision against cross-border hiring, which, as discussed previously, has also been noted by the courts. He also believed, based off a license plate he read on the road, that there were over 22,000 such vehicles: to put this in context, at the time of fieldwork there were less than 4,000 PHVs licensed in Newcastle, a city with a population more than twice the size of Wolverhampton. According to a Freedom of Information Request published on the website of City of Wolverhampton Council (2023), Dan was not far off. The council’s response to this request<sup>60</sup>, shown in Figure 13 below, not only confirmed that as of 15 September 2023 there were 23,833 Wolverhampton-licensed PHVs, but

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<sup>60</sup> The figures disclosed by the Council were significantly greater than those I had come to know a few weeks earlier, through a tweet by a solicitor affiliated with London’s black cab trade. It claimed to share the council’s response to a separate Fol request, according to which only 1200 of approximately 22,000 drivers licensed by the council resided in Wolverhampton. This response has not been published on the council’s website.

also that an overwhelming majority of drivers and vehicles it had licensed *did not* operate in Wolverhampton.



**Figure 13:** Response to Fol Request Ref. 5177341 (City of Wolverhampton Council, 2023)

That only 1200 or so of more than 35,000 drivers licensed by Wolverhampton Council resided in Wolverhampton itself was taken as a mockery of the occupational form of taxicab driving valued by the hackney carriage drivers I spoke to for my research. Yet this is not just an issue of numbers alone. In the second extract above, Alistair contends that licensing in Wolverhampton, or for that matter Newcastle, is a way to skirt around more stringent regulations in localities like Durham. To use an example he gave me, a vehicle licensed in Wolverhampton may not meet the vehicle specifications [e.g., age limits] to qualify for a license in Durham, and it would only be subject an annual MOT test, thereby avoiding bi-annual testing in Durham. Since cross-bordering has effectively undermined the enactment of spatial boundaries that curtailed taxicab drivers' work activities to where they actually reside, it is now presumably possible for people intending to undertake cross-border work to 'shop around' and obtain a license wherever the cost and standards are lower.

From the standpoint of hackney carriage drivers whose critiques and justifications I have examined in this chapter, meeting standards set by their own, local area, and expending cost, time and effort in a locally-determined process of qualifying as a licensed driver both form part of



*investments in an occupational form*, which ought to be valued in the industrial-aligned economic ordering of the taxicab trade that they continued to cling on to in affective terms. But rather than being defended by the local officials who were expected to uphold it, this ordering has been unravelling before their very eyes. The combination of an unprecedented rise in PHV licenses and the unrestrained practice of cross-bordering has resulted in what Ali, Osman, Alistair and other hackney carriage participants variably described as an uneven, unfair ‘playing field’ – one wherein there is no regard for the integrity of costly investments in form. In particular, the critiques levelled at certain councils’ rapid issuance of PHV licenses, which some participants likened to an ‘economy’ in itself, represent an unveiling of moral contamination through ‘transport of worths’ from the *market* world (Boltanski and Thévenot, 2006): the council no longer cares about the rules, only revenue. As indicated earlier, such critiques were often accompanied by another unveiling that implicates Uber as a company and actors in the central government, and takes aim at the presence of logics tied to the *connexionist* order of worth (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005).



**Figure 14:** An article criticising TfL's lack of action over cross-bordering by Wolverhampton-licensed PHVs in London in an issue of *The Badge*, published by London Cab Drivers Club (LCDC, 2023)

In conclusion, this chapter has demonstrated the manner in which hackney carriage participants make sense of their work activity in terms of an occupational form that is resonant with the industrial order of worth. It has shown how they mobilise this order as a resource for justifications and critiques in relation to disputes that have arisen in the wake of the controversy of platformisation and Uber's rise, whether that be the perceived devaluation of implements like route tests, everyday violations of rules against a backdrop of inadequate enforcement, cross-border hire, or a rapid rise in PHV licenses. As the occupational form that is so highly valued by them continues to unravel before their eyes, they remain attached to it, and continue to defend it. Such a defence crystallises, for example, in their stinging critiques of the actions of local authorities: that Newcastle City Council no longer takes issue with a practice [cross-border hire] that it had *itself* objected to in the past, and instead continues to grant licenses that fuel its expansion, is seen as a scandalous betrayal of its duty to uphold the locality-based, industrial-aligned occupational form they value. Regardless of these impassioned critiques and unveilings, however, there was, still, a painful realisation that reality has changed, that the occupational form they had invested in, and continued to take pride in, has effectively ceased to exist. This melancholic sentiment – the site of passive affections owed to lost investments (Bissell, 2022) – is well conveyed in the following statement from Osman, where he is seen to draw a parallel between the state of the taxicab trade today and the primeval, unregulated era of horse-drawn hackney carriages in the early 17<sup>th</sup> century, when they gained infamy for operating in a particularly disorderly manner:

“Any semblance of pride in taxi driving, in being a professional driver among other professional drivers, has been killed off. *Khatam [finished]! Tanga wala aagaya [The unruly coachman is back].*”

— Osman, Newcastle hackney carriage driver, 13 July 2023

## 5.2. ‘First They Feed You, Then They Starve You’: Precarious Pursuits of Market Worth in the PHV (Uber) Sector

### *The Ascendance of a Desired Product*

On 12 October 2022, at around 11:30am, I hopped into a private hire vehicle, a dark grey Mercedes, next to the Gilesgate Roundabout in Durham. Inside was British Asian PHV (Uber) driver Asim, a young, energetic man in his early thirties, donning a distinctive pair of mirrored sunglasses that I continue to vividly remember. Asim resides in Sunderland but is licensed in Newcastle. Just the day before, his contact had been passed onto me by one of my colleagues, who he had conveyed to Durham. When I called him the following morning, he happened to be approaching the end of a shift in Durham, and asked if it was possible for me to interview him on his drive home. I agreed, and shortly afterwards we were on the A690 road<sup>61</sup> heading towards Sunderland, conversing on various topics as Punjabi hip-hop tracks like Imran Khan’s ‘Amplifier’ played in the background. Asim was only the second PHV driver I recruited in my fieldwork, and unlike the first, David, he worked solely on the Uber app. After coming across various critiques of Uber and how it had upended a prior, industrial-oriented ordering of the taxicab trade, including in a half-day long engagement with Newcastle hackney participant Ali just a few days prior, I was immediately struck by the extent to which Asim was supportive of the Silicon Valley firm’s operations, which he evaluated from a moral standpoint that was situated firmly *outside* of the industrial world. In fact, I consider my first engagement with him to be a pivotal moment in my fieldwork, one where I began to gain insight into the *market* and *connexionist* orders of worth from a clearly affirmative point of view; it will therefore be referred to both in this chapter and the next.

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<sup>61</sup> The A690 directly connects Durham to Sunderland.

A few minutes after I had entered his vehicle, I remarked to Asim that I found his optimistic demeanour striking, and that it drew a contrast from all the other, mostly hackney participants I'd recruited thus far. His immediate response was to light-heartedly attribute my observation to him being a 'happy, jolly' person who maintains a 'positive outlook' on life, the latter being underpinned by a seemingly strong belief in the Islamic precept of *rizq*<sup>62</sup>. I then asked him: what's it like to work for a company that is 'up in the cloud'? He quickly countered that he works 'for himself', just 'through' the Uber app, qualifying this identification with self-employment by describing his work activity as a 'one-man business'. In running such a business, he said, you have to 'strategize on a daily basis', accounting for the presence of other self-employed drivers that you 'compete with' in accessing 'jobs' made available by the Uber app; in this respect his relationship with Uber may be framed as one whereby both him and Uber are independent *sellers*, and where Uber subcontracts the provision of its ride-hailing service to him and other drivers, all of whom constitute *competitors* to each other. Furthermore, if we recall an earlier discussion in the theoretical overview [Chapter 3.2] on how Uber frames its drivers as 'partner-drivers', then Asim seemed to be affirming that framing; at least in some ways he did believe that Uber allowed him to 'Be Your Own Boss'. He repeatedly told me that he was 'very happy' with this arrangement, making him just one of two 'deviant' cases who so clearly expressed such an evaluation. In the following extract, he addresses a key factor behind this positive evaluation – one that provides a useful entryway into the organising role played by the market order of worth in PHV (Uber) participants' everyday lives:

Salman: "When it comes to your relationship with Uber, where would you position yourself in the spectrum between say, a worker employed by Uber on one end, and a completely self-employed cab driver on the other?"

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<sup>62</sup> In Islam, *rizq* refers to all forms of 'sustenance' or 'provision', including money, that God bestows upon a person. Any increase or decrease in someone's *rizq* is believed to represent God's will, which is supposed to command acceptance on part of the believers.

Asim: “It’s [Uber] not an employer. Technically it’s an employer after the Supreme Court [judgement], but it’s not an employer. I knew that from the beginning. For me, they can be whatever they want in the world, if they charge a certain amount [of commission] for giving me a job, I’ll take it...[ ]...A lot of people went to court. They argued for workers’ rights and everything, yeah? But for me, *if you’re not happy with it, do something else...*[ ]...I mean, Uber has competition, Uber’s got shitloads of competition anyway. Like if we are talking about here, in the North East, then Bolt is here, and other ride-hailing apps some of which are run by local cab firms. And if you go to London you can go on Kaptan, on Ola, there’s so many others.”

Salman: “But no one’s got the scale of Uber.”

Asim: “No, they’re the biggest in the world. So that’s what I’m saying, *I’m very happy where I am*. In five years’ time, let’s just say Uber’s bankrupt, there’ll be another ride-hailing app, because their technology is very similar. So it’s not that I’m happy with Uber as a specific company, or I’ll be with Uber the rest of my life. I’m not loyal to Uber, I’m loyal to the technology and how it is and what it’s doing for me. They’re not physically doing anything for me. *So if someone else came along and that’s where the demand is, I’d go there.*”

– Interview exchange, ride-along, 12 October 2022

Asim’s accordance of worth to whichever ride-hailing app garners the most demand from customers is aligned with the higher common principle of *competition* in the market world. It is because of Uber’s strong competitive position in the private hire sector, specifically in terms of the high *demand* for its service, that he was ‘very happy’ to drive for them at the time of fieldwork. As an independent seller situated in the market world, he derived market worth [money, wealth] from a distinct, identifiable service that was highly desired. He further justified his qualification of himself as a *worthy* seller on the basis of his trained deployment of certain strategies in running his ‘one-man business’. One notable strategy had to do with scheduling: by starting at 6am or shortly after in the morning, he capitalised on the availability of ‘big [commuter] jobs’ that were

‘a minimum of £20-25’, enabling him to ‘hit his numbers early’. By undertaking iterative observations on an everyday basis, he had computed a seemingly reliable relationship between time, mobility patterns and the nature of jobs offered by the Uber app: in his estimation, there was a ‘95%’ likelihood of ‘big jobs’ coming through in the morning. This predilection for ‘longer jobs’ also held at other times, and was broadly rationalised in terms of the minimisation of ‘dead miles’ and ‘waiting time’, both of which can rack up costs associated with running a cab [fuel, insurance, depreciation, etc.] and cut into one’s profit margin.

Along with attributing worth on the basis of the capability to deploy business strategies, like the one noted above, Asim also made this capability – or lack thereof – the basis of a critique aimed at those PHV (Uber) drivers who refused to compete on the terms available to them, and instead went to court, bringing into play objects and beings that are *foreign* to the market world (Boltanski and Thévenot, 2006, p. 219). It was implied that had these drivers been diligent enough to invest in their role as sellers, and put their own strategies to work, they would have nothing to complain about. The essence of this evaluation may be surmised as follows: a worthy seller must actively engage themselves in the vagaries of the market – or *play the game*, so to speak – as this is the only means through which a provisional knowledge of market rhythms across space and time can be acquired, drawn on, and then reworked on a continual basis. This belief in the centrality of market rhythms relates directly to his mention of the possibility of Uber going bankrupt in the future, which indicates that he situated himself in an ordering of worth where *instability* was to be anticipated and prepared for; shifting desires and competitive dynamics mean that it can never be ruled out entirely (Boltanski and Thévenot, 2006, p. 197). Investing time and effort in acquiring knowledge that can moderate such instability – a variation of mental acumen oriented specifically to the logics of the market world – was thus presented as a vital prerequisite to one’s qualification as a market actor. In the same vein, it was drawn on in a critique that marked certain actors as *deficient*, disqualifying them from the realm of market relations.

Asim's critique of fellow PHV (Uber) drivers along these lines foreshadows a broader theme – PHV (Uber) drivers taking aim at other PHV (Uber) drivers – that will recur, in varying forms, throughout this chapter.

Even though Asim stands out as one of just two participants who so clearly expressed a positive evaluation of their work activity in terms of a market ordering of worth, his qualification of Uber as a worthy *seller*, and relatedly of Uber's transportation service as a distinct, identifiable *product* that is desired by *customers*, resonates with similar comments by a number of other PHV (Uber) participants. At the very beginning of our one-time, two-hour long engagement, Obi, a Nigerian PHV (Uber) driver, exclaimed that Uber 'is a crazy company, its business model is very good', with the energy behind his statement betraying a certain admiration for Uber as a worthy being in the market world. On a slightly different note, David once described demand for Uber's transport service as a 'protection', contrasting the frequency of jobs received via the Uber app to the time before Uber, when both hackney and PHV drivers were accustomed to long, idle intervals between jobs, especially in the daytime<sup>63</sup>. In his view, this bringing-closer of jobs, irrespective of the amount or fairness of their value, moderated the unpredictability of *flows* [of people, money, traffic, weather, and myriad other actants] that has always characterised the occupation of taxicab driving.

All these participants' reliance on strong demand for Uber's service relates directly to the proficiency of the Uber app as a *market device* that facilitates transactions between buyers and sellers (Muniesa et al., 2007; McFall, 2009), which was alluded to by Asim in his mention of 'what the technology [of the Uber app] is *doing*' for PHV (Uber) drivers like himself: enabling them to

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<sup>63</sup> David was specifically referring to hackney carriage drivers waiting for jobs while queued up at the rank, and PHV drivers waiting for dispatch at offices of 'traditional' local PHV operators. Both practices continue today, although their extent has been curtailed by the decline of local operators on one end and drivers signing onto the apps to 'fill in' idle times on the other.

tap into Uber's ubiquitously wide customer base, in order to make a living. The following two sections delve further into this aspect of market devices.

### ***Clash of Market Devices***

It was noted earlier that out of a total of 13 participants who undertake private hire work on the Uber app, Asim was one of just two 'deviant' cases who assuredly mobilised a *market* mode of justification in what was a largely positive evaluation of their work relations. The second such case was Tom, who is licensed as a hackney carriage driver in the South East of England but now works primarily on the Uber app<sup>64</sup>. I came across Tom on Twitter, where he has a pseudonymised account and regularly posts about controversial issues in the taxicab trade from a somewhat contrarian, devil's advocate point of view, for instance by asserting that cross-bordering by Wolverhampton PHVs is a 'completely legal' practice, and then standing his ground in the face of fierce blowback from other users [mostly London hackneys]. Towards the end of April 2023, I direct messaged him and asked if he would be willing to answer a few questions, either in a one-time online interview or by returning written responses. He responded by saying that he would be happy to do the latter.

Although the questions I sent Tom were predominantly drawn from a revised interview schedule<sup>65</sup> developed a few months prior, perhaps the most curious matter of all for me was why, as a hackney carriage driver, he had switched over to private hire work on the Uber app – I had not, and would not, encounter any other instance of such a transition in my fieldwork. The set of

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<sup>64</sup> Hackney carriage drivers are able to take private hire bookings as long as the price for a journey remains below the meter fare set by their licensing authority. Bookings may be taken through a PHV operator, like Uber, or directly; an operator's license is not needed for the latter. As was made evident by early cross-bordering by Berwick-licensed hackneys and the subsequent case 'Newcastle City Council v Berwick-upon-Tweed Borough Council' (2008), the indexing of private hire fares to the maximum meter fare does not apply beyond the area where a hackney carriage driver is licensed. Owing to confidentiality concerns Tom did not disclose whether or not he also takes bookings beyond his area, although he was clear on his view that cross-bordering is a 'legal' practice.

<sup>65</sup> See Appendix D.



responses I received after a gap of three weeks was quite surprising. After more than four years of working on the Uber app, his overall evaluation of the aforementioned transition remained staunchly positive: he had ‘nothing to report except great experiences’, and praised Uber as an ‘exceptional company’ that ‘allows you to be completely self-employed’. Beyond this identification with self-employment, or the role of a *seller* in the market world, he also justified the transition in terms of his discernment of the rise of a new economic ordering of taxicab relations – one that had been driven by the Uber app as a *market device*:

“I don't take many fares on the meter anymore, but passengers find the price extortionate, and prefer Uber. *It's quite clear what customers want, and its fixed prices and peace of mind* [\*thumbs-up emoji\*].”

– Tom, South East hackney carriage driver, written response, 3 May 2023

Tom's move away from meter fares, as described in the extract above, was premised on his assessment that a large proportion of his customers was no longer satisfied with, nor accustomed to, how the taximeter works as a market device. This century-old device adds fixed, regular increments to a base price<sup>66</sup> based on time and distance travelled, with the final price only known once a journey has come to an end. In contrast, the Uber app as market device presents customers with a price estimate upfront [a ‘fixed price’ in Tom's reading], even before they have confirmed a booking. Not only are these estimates very likely to be accurate, but they are also cheaper than the meter fare set by the local authority, with the possible exception of when surge prices apply – an algorithmic mechanism whose presence in Uber drivers' everyday work practices will be examined shortly. For Tom, the lower prices offered by Uber were not an issue; since they better reflect customers' appetite to pay for taxicab services, they end up leading to an increase in the

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<sup>66</sup> For example, if the base price is £3, then that is what the meter will read at the beginning of a journey. It will then increase [‘tick up’] in regular, fixed increments based on the time and distance travelled, for instance £0.80 per mile. The base price and the interval together make up a ‘tariff’; a different tariff, with a higher base rate and increment, comes into operation at night time [Tariff 2 or Rate 2], or on public holidays [Tariff 3 or Rate 3; higher than Tariff 2].

volume of *transactions* that can be engaged in. When asked in a follow-up question about his overall view of Uber's recently revamped 'dynamic pricing' model, which correlates pricing to real-time computations of supply and demand based on geolocation data from drivers and riders, he responded:

"Dynamic pricing works very well in my opinion, and I very, very rarely have a passenger complain about pricing. They find Uber to be reasonably priced, and have no issue with it."

– Tom, South East hackney carriage driver, written response, 3 May 2023

This response is revealing as his judgement centres on whether or not the price is seen as commensurate to the *customers'* desire for, and ability to spend money on, the transport service provided by Uber. His own view of Uber's pricing only followed from whether or not this test, which seeks to uphold the ideal of a *fair price* for customers in the market world, had been adequately met (Boltanski and Thévenot, 2006).

Taken together, then, Tom's observations tell us of a *clash of market devices*: the ascendance of the Uber app as a market device has spelled the downfall of an earlier market device, that of the taximeter. In his assessment, the average taxi user no longer seemed to have a predilection towards entering the 'calculative space' (Kjellberg, 2007) generated by the latter – worrying about each successive increment, and the overall higher cost, was not conducive to their 'peace of mind'. It is important to recall at this point that while the taximeter's facilitation of transactions between buyers and sellers is aligned with a market ordering of worth, the fixing of meter fares and tariffs by local authorities forms part of the broader, industrial-aligned regulatory framework of the hackney carriage sector. Just a decade or so ago, the universality of this device was such that it was widely employed in the PHV sector, with the only difference being that the setting of tariffs was left up to the operators themselves. This longstanding practice was referred to by hackney carriage participant, Osman, when he insisted that 'any fare should be metered' [see

previous chapter]. However, Uber's business operation was incompatible with this device<sup>67</sup>; for the company's algorithmic pricing model to take hold, it needed to be able to deploy its own device: the Uber app. In the UK, the gradual shifting of customer preferences away from metered [and in the case of hackney carriages, regulated] fares, and towards cheaper fares that are based on almost-instantaneous determinations of demand and supply computed by the privately owned Uber app, can therefore be taken as a shift towards a more market-oriented determination of pricing – one whereby foreign objects from the *industrial* and *civic* worlds<sup>68</sup> no longer contaminate the test (Boltanski and Thévenot, 2006, pp. 219-20).

### ***Market Attachments / Detachments***

Tom's observations on customers favouring the market device of the Uber app, discussed in the previous section, open up an opportunity to dissect PHV participants' views on the relationship between this device and taxicab passengers in further detail. The following statement, by PHV (own operator + Uber) participant David, tells us about his own nuanced understanding of this relationship:

"I mean, everything seems to be moving so fast, people just haven't got the time anymore. *Everybody just wants everything now*. Maybe the older people are a bit chilled out, you know, but the younger ones, they just want it *now*...[ ]...I imagine that in 10 years' time, no one will even want to have to go to the [taxi] rank anymore. Why walk all the way to the rank when you can just sit in here, press a button [on the Uber app], and an Uber can wait out the door for you, you know?"

– David, Durham PHV (own operator + Uber) driver, in-person interview, 7 July 2023

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<sup>67</sup> One event where this incompatibility was brought to the fore relates to Uber's decision to exit from Denmark's market in 2017, after newly enacted taxi legislation required taximeters to be fitted into all licensed cabs (Henley, 2017).

<sup>68</sup> I am referring here to the beings and objects involved in local authority price regulation, which involves each council undertaking consultations with residents, and then fixing fares and tariffs for a certain period [often at least a year]. While consultations on taxi fares may be said to draw on the *civic* world, the predictability they achieve may be said to reinforce an *industrial* ordering of the hackney carriage trade.

‘Everyone just wants everything *now*’ was a recurrent phrase in my engagements with David, a long-term participant with whom I met on 22 occasions between September 2022 and July 2023. It was his descriptor for a noticeable shift in the behaviours and preferences of people wanting to take a cab: whereas before you had to street hail, walk to a rank or phone up a local firm, nowadays all you need to do is ‘press a [digital/touch screen] button’ on the Uber app. In his view, those unfamiliar with this simple gesture needed only to try it a few times and they will *want* to avail the convenience afforded by it, again and again: *this* is how the Uber app as market device ‘formats the dispositions’ (McFall, 2009, p. 279) of its users.

Relatedly, that David pointed towards there being a temporal quality to this relationship is indicative of his awareness of repetitive engagements with this device fostering a *market attachment* in its users. Such attachments are affective in nature, blurring the distinction between ‘the sacred value of human relationships and the technical dimension of material ties’ (McFall et al., 2017, p. 21). Looking specifically at the Uber app, this means that it can alter *the state of the app user*, gradually turning them into someone who intuitively and competently engages with the app, as well as *its own state as a technical object*, by assuming a personalised character that reinforces the user’s attachment. One illustration of the latter can be found in the app presenting users with suggested destinations based on past trips, which give them an ‘affective push’ (Anderson, 2023, p. 405) towards rekindling ‘an obligation from the past that is brought to bear on the present’ (Hennion, 2017, p. 112). Both PHV (Uber) and hackney carriage drivers recognised that this cultivation of market attachments was a key factor behind the competitive edge Uber has today. The hackneys tended to critique it as an underhanded attempt at ‘making people used to’ the convenience of the app, which in their view would not be as effective without Uber’s offering of cheap, subsidised fares – something that they predicted, or hoped, would not last. Conversely, PHV drivers saw it as a sign of the continued pre-eminence, for the foreseeable future, of the economic ordering of taxicab relations that they were enrolled in.

A number of scholars in STS and human geography have previously underlined that attachment has *detachment* as its ‘inevitable other’ (McFall et al., 2017, p. 13; Anderson, 2023, p. 400; Massey, 1991; Callon et al., 2002); in the context of this chapter, it may be argued that a similar dynamic is at work with respect to market devices, as well as the wider economic assemblages they form part of, in taxicab relations today. Several participants framed this dynamic in terms of an age gradient: while an attachment to the Uber app is particularly well sedimented in young people, who are well versed with technology and may have grown up while Uber already existed, it is middle-aged and sometimes older people who are detaching from the taximeter as market device. Although the latter shift is by no means complete, there was a widespread realisation that time was on Uber’s side, and that the number of routine, competent users of the Uber app would only increase over time.

The ramifications of this *attachment / detachment* dynamic were already being felt in the hackney carriage sector. It may be linked, for instance, to the occurrence of certain rule infringements that were seen to be critiqued by hackney carriage participants, like asking for a fixed price so the meter does not have to be turned on [see previous chapter]. Or their complaints about customers who step out of a hackney carriage in the middle of a journey, after realising that the metered price may end up being too high [see Figure 15 below]. These critiques were made alongside an acknowledgement that Uber’s pricing, coupled with the strength of its market attachments, had lowered the average ‘price point’ for taxicab services. And that work was drying up as a result. Even if this is something that was derided as unjust, it makes for a reality that they nonetheless have to contend with.

“Excuse me driver, on the app it said the journey was going to be £20”

“Ok”

“But it’s £20 now and we’re not there ?”

“No we’re not, what app was it”

“”Bolt, but I don’t think they do black taxis do they ?

“No I think that was for a mini- cab”

“We’ll get out here”

**Figure 15:** Tweet by a London black cab driver about a customer who stepped out in the middle of a journey, after realising that the fare was metered [‘minicab’ is the colloquial referent for a PHV in London] (X, 2023b)

### ***Pouncing on Opportunity: The Erratic Highs of Surge Pricing***

The previous section has illustrated how Uber’s pricing, together with *market attachments* to its app, give the company a competitive edge in the market for taxicab services – an edge that is valued by PHV (Uber) drivers. While I concluded that section by briefly considering how this lower pricing comes to detrimentally affect the earnings of hackney carriage drivers, I now turn to how it is perceived and evaluated by PHV (Uber) drivers themselves. More specifically, the question I attempt to address is: are the fares offered to Uber drivers on an everyday basis judged to be fair, and legitimate, in terms of the *market* order of worth? We observed earlier that for Tom, a hackney who switched over to Uber, the answer was seemingly yes; since these prices better reflected customers’ affordability, they led to an increase in the number of transactions. Tom, however, was a deviant case, and his resounding, wide-based endorsement of Uber’s overall business model and contentment with his own work relations, including the amount of fares he routinely earned, was not representative of the views expressed by other PHV (Uber) participants. The uniqueness of his viewpoint comes to the fore when we consider that *everyone* else, including

the other two deviant cases of Asim and David<sup>69</sup>, expressed some level of discontentment with the fares they were offered. As my usage of the phrase ‘some level of’ indicates, this discontentment is not to be taken as a continuous, unchanging affect, but one whose potency varied with, and was contingent upon, *spatiotemporally specific* constellations of work relations encountered by these actors, the variations of which I begin to examine below.

While in the course of ethnographic fieldwork I heard numerous accounts of situations wherein discontentment with Uber’s pricing took on a more overt form, raising the participants’ ‘level of reflexivity’ to that of a critique (Barthe et al., 2013, p. 189), it is helpful to first examine a constellation of work relations that may be described as the exception: one wherein they found Uber’s pricing to be not just satisfactory, but also, in many cases, enthralling. This constellation is tied to the intermittent onset of Uber’s algorithmic mechanism of ‘surge’, which is a variant of Uber’s routine model of ‘dynamic pricing’. Although these two mechanisms are intrinsically interlinked, such that one derives from the other, it is interesting to note that for PHV participants surge appeared to hold its own, distinct identity. Most of them viewed it as an exception to, rather than a mere variation of, the pricing model they contend with for the majority of time they drive for Uber. The latter model [dynamic pricing] relies on extraction of smartphone geolocation data from driver and rider app users on a continual basis, based on which the Uber app – in its role as a *market device* – computes real-time estimates for demand and supply in a given area, and concurrently adjusts the price of journeys up or down in line with those estimates. If prices increase beyond the ‘normal’ range of fares offered to Uber drivers, which participants described

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<sup>69</sup> Asim was classified as a deviant case because of the unequivocal manner in which he opposed industrial action by Uber drivers, which was indicative of a strong alignment with a market ordering of worth. As will be seen shortly, this alignment was slightly weakened in our second meeting, but asserted nonetheless. While doubts about the effectiveness of industrial action were widely felt, no other PHV participant opposed it in such clear, principled terms.

Conversely, David was classified as deviant because of his endorsement of industrial critiques levelled by hackney carriage participants at Uber, local authorities, actors in the central government, and Uber drivers. This endorsement did not translate into a complete disqualification of logics tied to the market order of worth, but was not observed in any other PHV participant.

as between £1 to £2.5 per mile<sup>70</sup>, then a surge may come into effect, with the same being indicated on the user interface of the driver app [see Figures 16 and 17 below].

The onset of surge is by design a sporadic event, only occurring when demand exceeds supply to an extent that takes the fares offered *beyond* the usual range offered under dynamic pricing. Once this happens, certain features of the Uber app are activated: it colour-codes the map view on the driver app; sends push notifications to ‘offline’ drivers in the vicinity; and informs riders of higher prices either through a ‘peak factor’ that denotes the extent of the surge [e.g., ‘1.5x’], or alternative in-app text like ‘fares are higher due to increased demand’<sup>71</sup>. Price increases always take effect within a specific area whose extent is algorithmically determined, with their value correlating directly to the differential between demand and supply. So, for instance, if supply is particularly low on a Friday night in Newcastle city centre, then drivers present in the area may find themselves in the middle of a ‘4.0x’ peak factor [e.g., Figure 16]: this means that they will earn four times as much as they usually would for the same journey.

I now move towards examining PHV (Uber) participants’ accounts of finding themselves in a surge, or otherwise capitalising on it. The majority of these accounts were from the past, as in several months before these drivers’ participation in my research project, and this was connected to a widespread assessment that the incidence of surge, as well as its average value, had gone down. Nevertheless, the events referred to in these accounts remained highly memorable for the participants. The combination of these characteristics of surge – its scarcity on one end, and its memorability on the other – makes it an interesting object of sociological inquiry. Let us now

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<sup>70</sup> For comparison, the current daytime rate [‘Tariff 1’] for Durham licensed hackney carriage drivers is as follows: £4.90 for ‘the first 1760 yards / 480 seconds, or part thereof’ [base rate] and then £0.20 for ‘each subsequent 146.66 yards or part thereof’ [increment] (Durham County Council, 2024). 1760 yards is equivalent to 1 mile.

<sup>71</sup> Based on my own usage of the Uber app, this seems to be the case more recently.



begin dissecting this object, and how it figures in PHV (Uber) drivers' evaluations of worth, in relation to the below selection of extracts:

"I've seen price surges on Uber where students are paying twenty quid to go less than a mile. And they paid it. There was a couple I picked up once, from this pub called Whitechurch, just near the Bill Bryson Library, yeah? I picked them up there and they were going to the top of Crossgate where the Angel is, and they paid 40 quid. I had one from St Mary's College to the railway station. They paid 40 quid. I had a Bill Bryson one for the Swan and Three Cygnets, and they paid 20 quid. Pouring down the rain, student couldn't be arsed to walk anyway, *obviously money was no object*. And then I've had a guy I picked up once from right next to the [Durham] Marketplace and he was going Whinney Hill, which is like half a mile, and it was 15 quid on Uber. *And there were loads of taxis there at the rank, it would have been a fiver from one of them.*"

– David, Durham PHV (own operator + Uber) driver, ride-along, 22 September 2022

"Two or three years ago, there used to be very good surge [prices]. I picked somebody up from here [Durham] and went to Newcastle, £100. From Trevelyan College to Newcastle. £100. Surge. But these days the highest surge is a 1.2 factor, like 20 percent. No more than that. *We love surge*, but it doesn't come the way it used to...[ ]...Nowadays it's not unusual for a surge to last 10-15 minutes [in Newcastle] *before enough drivers have rushed into town.*"

– Obi, Newcastle PHV (Uber) driver, 27 October 2022

"Just a few weeks ago I did a job that was 3 miles, £22. I think it was on a Friday night, the surge was higher than usual. *So I got lucky there*. But you can never tell with the prices [on Uber], you know. My dad also does Uber and he told me he had a bad day yesterday, but I had a good day."

– Jack, Newcastle PHV (Uber) driver, ride-along, 22 April 2023

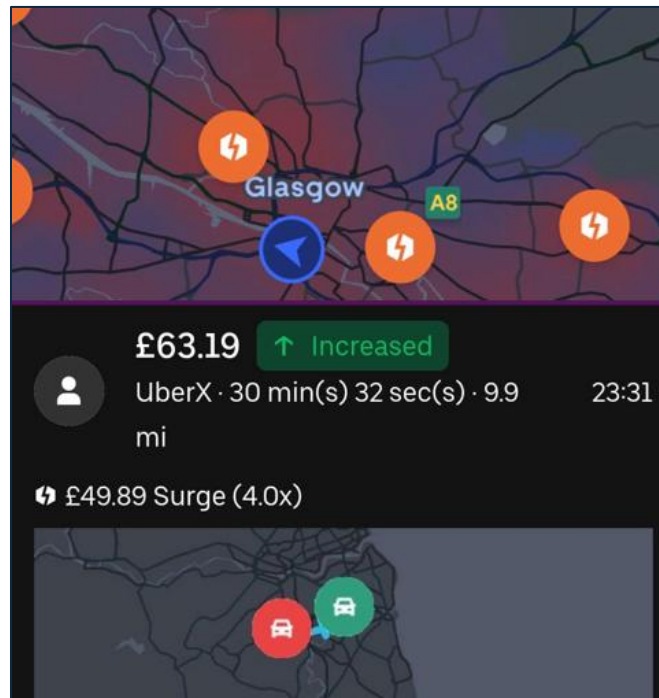
The statements above recall situations where Uber's surge pricing mechanism led to significant increases in the value of participants' services as Uber drivers, allowing them to acquire

more worth [money] as independent sellers in the market world. As Obi's mention of drivers 'rushing into town' tells us, the effectiveness of this mechanism in matching supply with increased demand rests on drivers promptly capitalising on the prospect of higher earnings presented to them, thereby affirming the virtue of *opportunism* in the market world (Boltanski and Thévenot, 2006, pp. 197-99). Both his and David's accounts of surge were highly affectively charged: the tonality of their voice, their non-verbal and facial expressions, and overall demeanour in that part of our conversation were indicative of a strong sense of enthusiasm for finding themselves in this constellation of their work relations. I remember Obi smiling as he said, on behalf of all PHV (Uber) drivers, that 'we love surge'.

Relating this positive sentiment to their identification with the market order of worth, it may be argued that surge comprises a previously-sporadic, now-scarce event wherein these drivers are able to achieve *equivalence* in terms of this order: for the duration that it lasts, they are all competent, opportunistic sellers engaged in an exhilarating game of promptly accepting, and successfully undertaking, lucrative trips on the Uber app. Crucially, this game enables not just the enactment of *opportunism*, but also of these drivers' own selves as *worthy* beings in the market world. The latter qualification of self-worth may be related to an observation by sociologist and former cab driver Fred Davis, who in his seminal paper on the marked lack of constraints to tame uncertainty in the cab driving occupation underlined the role of the 'the intellectual play which uncertainty stimulates *and without which cabdriving would be for many nothing more than unrelieved drudgery*' (1959, p. 164; emphasis added).

While Davis related 'intellectual play' to the creative tactics employed by cabbies in Chicago to turn the always-uncertain chances of extracting a tip in their favour, surge as an event is also marked by uncertainty, albeit in different ways. An Uber driver never knows when exactly a surge will come into effect, the areas it will cover, what the peak factor will be, the value of each surge trip that will be offered, and when it will end. Yet for every single participant who had

‘worked a surge’ on the Uber app, it was within this space of high uncertainty, high reward that they found a sense of purpose and recognition with respect to their work activity. They could, in fact, qualify themselves as worthy market actors. This qualification was primarily owed to the value of transactions that were offered, which was deemed sufficiently high so as to be deemed *profitable* – as it should be in an ideal enactment of market relations. The significance of this test of profitability was highlighted by a number of PHV participants; David, for instance, remarked that he ‘would work them [surge periods] everyday if they were there’, which means that he would accept most trips on the Uber app, or be online more often<sup>72</sup>, if the fares offered were as profitable as they are during a surge.



**Figure 16:** Red shaded colour-coding on the Uber app, indicating that a surge is in effect, and a receipt from a surge fare (Facebook, 2023a; 2023b)

<sup>72</sup> As indicated previously, David is also an independent PHV operator. His work mainly comprises of contract work for Durham County Council, such as school pick-ups and drop-offs, together with pre-bookings that he receives directly [most commonly ‘airport runs’]. He is registered on the Uber app but only goes online in a few cases: to take trips on the way to or back from his own pre-booked trips, and when surge prices are in effect.



**Figure 17:** Grey colour-coding on the Uber app, indicating that demand is picking up in specified areas and that there may be a surge later, ride-along, 22 September 2022

It should, however, be acknowledged that the uncertainty inherent in how the *event* of surge is organised, and the manner of its onset on the Uber app [in-app messages, push notifications, colour-coded maps, etc.], also plays an important role, by heightening the perception that a high-stakes game – to win the most lucrative fares – has just begun. It is in relation to this aspect that the third and final extract, taken from a 20-minute ride-along conversation I had with Jack, a young man in his late twenties from Gateshead, painted a relatively more ambivalent picture of encounters with surge pricing. At the time we spoke, Jack had spent just six months working full-time on the Uber app; this made him the least experienced of all twenty participants I recruited over one year of ethnographic fieldwork. Jack's statement is intriguing because while it shares with the other two a positive evaluation of the event of surge, it reads the algorithmic logics of this event as being *shared with*, rather than departing from, the broader model of dynamic pricing.

Perhaps this had something to do with him not experiencing lucrative, 3.0x plus surge periods of the kind recalled by Obi and David, whose incidence had now declined. But by drawing a link between surge and the routine temporality of Uber driving – one wherein dynamic pricing applies but a surge is *not* in effect – it provides a useful segue into a consideration of the normal range of fares offered by Uber, and how those fares are evaluated in terms of the market order of worth. For Jack, prices fluctuated erratically whether or not a surge is in place: 'you can never tell' what you will be offered, and whether the same was being offered to another Uber driver [in this instance, his own father]. Prior to recalling the £22 surge trip, he critiqued this unpredictability in pricing – contending that Uber 'should be more consistent' with the fares offered to drivers<sup>73</sup>, which ought to be 'a little bit above the weekend rate'. This was, in essence, a call to adhere to the ideal of 'pure and perfect information' in the market order (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005, p. 130),

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<sup>73</sup> Jack also said that he was 'clueless' on how Uber calculates holiday pay, which it implemented following the Supreme Court's ruling in 'Uber BV and others (Appellants) v Aslam and others (Respondents)' (2021), in which Uber drivers were classed as 'workers' under the UK's Employment Rights Act 1996.

and he elaborated on it by sharing that the same £22 job would have been a mere £7-8, or possibly even less, on a weekday. He recognised that this discrepancy is owed to lower demand on weekdays, but insisted that drivers not knowing the specific criteria behind it made for a situation that was ‘unfair’.

Grappling with pay uncertainty was thus a routine and frustrating feature of Jack’s work activity: as he himself put it towards the end of our conversation, ‘it’s all luck!’ when it comes to driving for Uber. It should be remembered that such uncertainty is *not* contradictory to a market form of coordination, wherein instability owing to continually shifting desires for products and services is to be expected. Yet Jack’s account indicates that his own situatedness in this ordering was an uneasy one: *he was unable to fully embrace it*. The discrepancy between weekday non-surge and weekend surge fares that he was faced with was confusing and disorienting, and seemed to throttle his self-qualification as a market actor – partly because he wasn’t able to acquire enough worth [money] to justify his work activity as being profitable [even if occasional surge trips did meet this test], and partly because information on how prices are algorithmically determined was systematically withheld. In Jack’s account, both these factors – profitability *and* perfect information – emerge as necessary prerequisites to qualifying oneself as an actor in the market world.

To conclude, then, we may say that surge is an event that momentarily opens up an affectively charged space of opportunity – a space that may be characterised as liminal in the sense that it is where the ‘model test’ of *profitability* in the market world is satisfactorily met, and PHV (Uber) drivers are able to qualify themselves as market actors. Empirical data collected in this ethnographic study suggest that Uber drivers are likely to consent to their working conditions, especially pay, in the midst of this event. However, and as Jack’s account demonstrates, this is *not* a given: the erratic onset of surge can draw attention to, instead of mask, the backdrop of ‘normal’ fares against which it emerges. Due to their low, unprofitable value, these fares throttle, rather

than enable, PHV (Uber) drivers' situatedness in the market order of worth. The implications of this vacillation between qualification and falling short of qualification will be continue to be spelled out over the remainder of this chapter.

### ***Attention to Others: The Necessity of Attunement***

The preceding section has illustrated how Uber's surge pricing mechanism orients PHV (Uber) drivers' work activity towards the virtue of *opportunism* in the market order of worth: once a surge takes effect, they are encouraged to 'pounce upon' the prospect of higher earnings. This cultivation of opportunism is not just limited to when a surge has already kicked in, but also precedes it, manifesting in the form of a constant 'watching out' for certain factors indicative of a surge. In the latter case, it concurrently affirms another virtue from the market world: that one pay *attention to others*, even if this attention is driven by *selfishness* in the pursuit of market worth (Boltanski and Thévenot, 2006, p. 200). 'Others' here can encompass various human and non-human actants, ranging from the number of people seen walking in a town centre, to push notification alerts sent by the Uber app, to the severity of the wind. The following extracts shed light upon some of these actants, and how PHV (Uber) drivers keep an eye out for their movements:

"*You have to be clever* [when driving for Uber]. You have to scope out the area before actually starting your shift. I may even move from one area to another and start over there, or wait a little bit if it hasn't picked up yet. If the jobs keep coming, then you know its picked up...[ ]...Most Saturdays have surge pricing, and in comparison to that most weekdays are quiet. But no two Saturdays are the same, so you have to see if its busy. I usually do a 15-hour shift on Saturday, go home around 6am, and take Sunday off. During the week I'll do just 5-6 hours in the day."

– Ahmet, Newcastle PHV (Uber) driver, ride-along, 22 April 2023

“These days I start at 4:30 or 5am, once I’ve had *sehri* [pre-dawn meal before fasting in the Islamic month of Ramadan], go till 10:30 or 11am, then go home, take some rest, do the school run, and then go out again from 4:30 until about 10pm. But I’ll be working late tomorrow because there’s a Newcastle [United] game on, *so it’ll be busy.*”

– Zubair, Newcastle PHV (Uber) driver, ride-along, 7 May 2023

“Basically, what you need is really heavy rain, and rush hour time. If I was sitting in the house and I wasn’t planning on working any particular day, and there was the news on that there’s a massive thunderstorm and flash flooding in Durham. *And I will be like: brilliant!...* [...] So you just *watch out* for that, you know, heavy rain, rush hour, snow, anything like that.”

– David, Durham PHV (own operator + Uber) driver, ride-along, 22 September 2022

The first statement above is taken from my one-time engagement with Ahmet, an Iranian PHV (Uber) who had switched over to taxicab driving after a stint in the hospitality industry. Very early on in our conversation, Ahmet lamented that Uber fares were ‘very cheap’, so much so that ‘*it can’t get cheaper than this*’, an observation that was consistent with the general assessment from PHV participants that the ‘normal’ level of Uber fares allowed them to earn a meagre rate of between £1 and £2.5 a mile. The widely-shared judgement that these fares are too ‘cheap’, in other words unprofitable, tells us that it is not just the intermittent onset of surge that stokes drivers’ *opportunism*, but also the low value fares they have to contend with on a routine basis; each instance of the former is an opportunity to break out of the latter.

Working surge periods on Saturdays, as Ahmet does, thus becomes less of a choice and more a practical constraint if one is to make a living. Whilst it is a common adage that taxicab drivers are their ‘own boss’ and can work ‘whenever they want’ – an adage that Uber rearticulates in how it conceptualises its ‘partner-drivers’ – in reality scheduling is driven by the necessity of *attuning* one’s work activity to constantly shifting market rhythms. These rhythms may be of a



*temporal* nature, for example the times when flows of people, money, alcohol, music and various other actants in the affective assemblage of the ‘night-time economy’ (Shaw, 2014; Bøhling, 2015; Pederson, Tutenges and Sandberg, 2017) happen to be in greater circulation, leading to drivers receiving ‘pings’ [booking requests] in quick succession, or they may be *spatial*, in the sense that they are concentrated more in one area versus another. In the absence of information about how exactly Uber’s algorithms indexed pricing to these rhythms, the relationship was assessed through the active formulation of lay, subjective understandings (Gregory, 2021), which drew upon experiential knowledge in a bid to fill in the puzzles left by partial representations or ‘cues’ made available by the Uber app: in-app messages, surge colour-coding, the average value of fares being offered at a given place and time, etc. Ahmet’s strategy of ‘scoping out’ different areas before starting a shift – in other words driving around, assessing how ‘busy’ it is as you go, and then picking a spot to wait for the first ‘ping’ – may be taken as an example of how PHV (Uber) drivers continually recalibrate, and then operationalise, these lay understandings. Such attempts at attunement to market rhythms signify *attention to others* in a market world.

In the second and third extracts, we learn about two more events that bring with them an increased likelihood of a surge: football matches, and extreme weather. Zubair, a Pakistani PHV (Uber) driver who held a factory job in the industrial city of Faisalabad before migrating to the UK, shared that he planned on working longer than usual on a match day, because ‘it’ll be busy’. This phrase, often featuring in pop culture portrayals of public interactions with taxicab drivers<sup>74</sup>, denotes an acceleration of market rhythms before and after a football match, opening up scarce, high-value transactions that drivers can enrol into via the market device of the Uber app. The same was observed by PHV participants for other major events, like concerts, festivals, Christmas markets, and so forth. In the last extract, David points to the combination of extreme weather and

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<sup>74</sup> The phrase has featured in viral posts on Twitter, memes and reels on Instagram, as well as stand-up comedy routines. See for example this bit from Peter Kay, from 1:02 onwards: <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=229820084833651>

rush hour as another space of opportunity – one that is slightly different in the sense that it relies on more people commuting home by cab than would otherwise be the case.

As actors endeavouring to situate themselves in the market world, PHV (Uber) drivers like Ahmet, Zubair and David keenly followed fluctuations in price based on such shifts in demand and supply, and continually vied to position themselves in a manner that would maximise the amount of market worth [money] they could acquire. Albeit these efforts to capitalise on high-value transactions did sometimes pay off, enabling them to fleetingly qualify themselves as worthy, opportunistic market actors, Zubair drew my attention towards a flipside that chips away at that qualification: at the same time that Uber holds out the carrot of increased fares during surge periods, the company *itself* becomes opportunistic and momentarily increases the commission. Such unexpected rises in the rate of commission, say from 20 to 30 percent, cut into the proportion of each high-value fare that goes to the driver, even if they end up earning more than the usual rate overall. The affective impact of these increases was particularly pronounced for those PHV participants who worked solely on the Uber app<sup>75</sup>, for whom it seemed to reinforce an impression that even when Uber gives with one hand, as it most clearly does during surge periods, it takes with the other. I will return to the issue of Uber's commission in the next chapter on the *connexionist* order; in the context of the present discussion, we can note that erratic, arbitrary increases in commission undermine PHV (Uber) drivers' difficult attempts at qualifying themselves as worthy sellers in the market world.

In the past two sections, I have dissected ethnographic data pertaining to PHV (Uber) drivers' everyday encounters with the algorithmic mechanisms of surge and dynamic pricing. My analysis has centred on these mechanisms' attempts to mobilise the virtues of *opportunism* and

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<sup>75</sup> In contrast, David, who intermittently uses the Uber app to 'fill in' journeys to and from bookings taken directly as an independent PHV operator, or when surge prices apply, was less affected by it. He justified this tactical, *opportunistic* reliance on the Uber app by telling me, on numerous occasions, that Uber fares are 'rubbish value', unless, of course, a surge was in place.

*attention to others* from the market world. Whether it is Uber's indexing of pricing to demand and supply, the exhilarating and sought-after event of surge, or the various subjective tactics employed in trying to attune one's work activity to shifting market rhythms, we have seen the organising role that logics from the market world play in the work activity of PHV (Uber) drivers. Equally, however, we have noted that these drivers routinely *fall short* of qualifying themselves as market actors, due primarily to the low, unprofitable fares offered to them under dynamic pricing. Discontentment resulting from the inability to achieve this qualification –in other terms an inability to attribute worth to themselves, to envisage common dignity (Boltanski and Thévenot, 2006, pp. 75-76) – comes to be expressed in terms of a judgement that was widely shared among these participants: that Uber's organisation of work relations is only legitimate in terms of the market order of worth *when surge prices are in place*. It is only in that liminal space that the model test of *profitability* is met, and these drivers are able to enact themselves as worthy beings in the market world. At all other times, not only does their work activity fail to meet this test, but often significantly falls short of it, and is therefore deemed to contradict meaningful participation in the market world. The increased effort and investment in the lead up to and during surge periods, as demonstrated by empirical data reviewed above, is testament to this judgement.

Given this judgement, one is led to wonder if the exciting-yet-ephemeral prospect of attaining a market qualification during surge periods functions as a strategy on Uber's part to maintain consent over pay and working conditions, over which it exercises significant control<sup>76</sup>. There are other strategies, too: offers to 'unlock' cash rewards by staying longer on a particular night, discounted gym memberships, holiday pay, contributions towards life insurance [inclusive

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<sup>76</sup> The different aspects of this control have been specified at various points in this thesis, particularly the theoretical section. Clearly, the two most important of these aspects are pay and the allocation of jobs; as the Court of Appeal's judgment in 'Uber BV and others v Aslam, Farrar and others' (2018) noted, Uber drivers 'do not and cannot negotiate with passengers... *They are offered and accept trips strictly on Uber's terms*' (p.66; emphasis added).

of paternity pay], and so forth. Being able to profit from a surge, however, was what most clearly underpinned positive evaluations of Uber driving. If the occasional offer of surge is really this important, then the company may be approaching a dire predicament: all PHV participants noted, with universal disappointment, that the frequency and value of surge had declined significantly. Seen in terms of the widely-shared judgement noted above, this decline translates into a further increase in the proportion of time in which they do *not* consent to the fares they are offered by Uber. The next section examines what participants saw as the determining factor behind this decline, and how it presents difficulties that convolute their situatedness in the market order of worth.

### ***Selfishness: When the Supply Side Bites***

What happens if, on average, there are almost always enough drivers out and about in a specific area to meet any anticipated rise in demand? Given the specifications of Uber's algorithms, *there will be no surge*, or if it does arise, it will have a very low 'peak factor'. This is precisely the situation faced by PHV (Uber) drivers today – one that was referred to by Obi when he lamented that surge no longer exceeded a *1.2x* factor. The cause of this shift can be drawn directly from Uber's indexing of dynamic pricing to shifts in demand and supply. Due to an unprecedented acceleration in PHV licensing over the past decade, the average quantity of Uber drivers who can be 'online' at a given place and time has increased, effectively reducing the likelihood of a supply shortage. And without such a shortage, a surge cannot arise. Perhaps the most succinct way to describe this shift is to repeat a refrain I heard again and again during my fieldwork: 'there are too many drivers'. Whereas for the hackneys this increase could be associated with the 'other side' [private hire sector], thus allowing for an externalisation of responsibility and the assumption of a position of injury relative to it, for PHV (Uber) drivers it constituted a particularly vexing dilemma whereby the responsibility for the remoteness of surge, and declining earnings, lied with none other than Uber drivers *themselves*.

Seen in terms of the market order of worth, this dilemma brings to the fore the limits of the virtue of *selfishness* in the market world: if a ‘new’ Uber driver enters the market and then makes money at your expense, they cannot be critiqued just on that basis, because doing so would violate both the conceptions of an ideal [*opportunistic, selfish*] market actor as well as the higher common principle [*competition*] in line with which market relations are organised. This contradiction was seen to be acknowledged by some PHV participants who defended the role played by large numbers of new, demographically diverse entrants to the PHV (Uber) sector in snatching market share away from the hackney carriage trade: Asim, for instance, figuratively asserted to these entrants that ‘I have no problem with you making money, I am happy for you to make money’. Such a view respects the virtues of *opportunism* and *selfishness*, along with the maxim of *competition*, in the market world, and while it was not asserted in such clear terms by most PHV participants, their painstaking attempts at qualifying as market actors – as observed in the previous two sections – are testament to their awareness of the organising principles of the world from which they seek their worth.

The question then arises: can this view endure in the face of falling earnings and remoteness of surge that are driven by the proliferation of selfish actors in a market with minimal fetters on competition? What if one’s *own* entry into the market, and the market worth subsequently acquired, may have been owed to the same lack of fetters? I will attempt to address these questions in relation to the following statements from PHV participants:

Salman: “What would you say is the biggest problem you face as an Uber driver – a problem or concern that you think should be a part of my research?”

Ajay: “The number one issue I’ve been having is that sometimes there are wait times of up to 1.5 to 2 hours before you get a job. Like I started work at 7:30am today and have only done 9 trips so far [by 4pm]. I guess there are too many drivers here [in Durham], and not as many jobs to go

around...[ ]...It wasn't like this when I first started over four years ago. Earnings were good, there were only a few Ubers in Durham."

Salman: "What do you do when a job isn't coming through?"

Ajay: "Just park up and wait [for a job to be offered], nothing else to do really."

Salman: "Why do you think the situation changed?"

Ajay: "Think of it like you're a pigeon. *First they [Uber] feed you, then they starve you* [\*laughs\*]. But they can do that, you know, because *the customers want the technology of Uber*."

Salman: "Do you think it would be better if there were less drivers being licensed? Like if there was a cap of some kind?"

Ajay: "Uber will not go along with any cap because they want more drivers, so they can get more commission [\*laughs\*]. So maybe the Council needs to do something? *I don't know*."

– Interview exchange, ride-along, 3 May 2023

"I think licensing has become too lenient, like there are drivers coming in now who don't speak a word of English...[ ]...The Council earns around a quarter million pounds just from [licensing] renewals. Where is that money going? Where is it being spent?...[ ]...Having to wait for jobs is *something you've just got to deal with* nowadays, and then we have some drivers – *apne log* [our people, i.e. Pakistanis/Asians] – who chase after the money, take anything they can get [\*shakes head\*]. I'll tell you one thing mate: *when you start chasing after the money, then the money starts running away from you*."

– Aziz, Newcastle PHV (Uber) driver, ride-along, 3 May 2023

The statements above reveal a heretofore unseen consequence of the increase in supply in the market for Uber driving, which continues unabated. The cumulative scale of this increase is such that it has not only diminished the chances of a surge, but also reduced the number of jobs that

the Uber app can allocate to each driver, especially at quieter times during the week. As a result, the average amount of time it takes to receive a job, otherwise called ‘wait time’, is trending upwards. Whereas before PHV (Uber) drivers took comfort in the knowledge that they did not experience the long idle intervals endemic to other forms of taxicab driving<sup>77</sup>, now they find themselves facing a variation of the same problem. Parked up in a lay-by or residential street, scrolling through Facebook, wondering when you’ll get that next ‘ping’ – this has become part of the ordinariness of the work activity of Uber driving. My conversation with Ajay, a middle-aged family man from the southern state of Karnataka in India who had been driving for Uber since late 2016, was the first instance in which I realised that this experience of waiting for jobs can be particularly disorienting for PHV (Uber) drivers. While Ajay also expressed his displeasure at the normal rate offered for Uber trips, and the related remoteness of surge, it was the affective discomfort of having to wait for jobs, and continually being disappointed at how many he’d managed to do, that took precedence in his overall evaluation of his work activity.

This affective discomfort may be viewed in terms of the concept of ‘digital lethargy’ outlined by Hu (2022), which he ties in part to moments akin to the one being centred here: you’re online and ready to work, but Uber is not sending you a job, and there is nothing you can do about it. Hu posits that such moments induce a ‘state of exhaustion, disappointment, and listlessness’ in platform workers, whereby investment and vigour in one’s work activity is withdrawn, and long-drawn-out disappointment momentarily evaded through a defensive posture of ‘focusing intensely on the present’ (p. 25), for instance by scrolling through social media, binge watching videos or chatting to friends and family over the phone. The exhaustion of digital lethargy may be understood as forming part of exhaustion from the persistent *failure to realise a market qualification*, to enact oneself as a worthy being. The pivotal factor behind this failure is that of

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<sup>77</sup> This impression was attributed to both the extensive demand for Uber’s service, and the efficiency of the Uber app as a market device, both of which underpinned PHV drivers’ evaluations of Uber as a worthy seller in the market world. The former aspect was addressed in the first section of this chapter, and the latter in the second and third sections.

oversupply, which leads to both the entrenchment of the ‘normal’ fares that fail the key test of *profitability* and so thwart one’s attempt at qualification, as well as long wait times, during which the possibility of attempting to qualify as a market actor is precluded altogether.

The phrase ‘I don’t know’ is indicative of the muted voice that befalls the Uber driver after they realise that they do not have any allies whose support they can enlist in controlling this key factor, and thus cannot see any outcome but to continue enduring the ‘moments of thwarted agency [/qualification]’ (Hu, 2022) their work relations inflict upon them. This muted voice is indicative of moral ambivalence, or in other words, the *lack of situatedness in a given order of worth*: critique cannot emerge unless one knows, and stands on, the ground from which it is to be mounted. It is necessary to reiterate that such ambivalence is not the actor’s sole doing, but a product of the relations they are enrolled in. Ajay’s understanding posture towards Uber [as an independent seller] wanting ‘more commission’ on one end, and discontentment with increased wait times and reduced earnings due to ‘too many drivers’ on the other, illustrates this ambivalence: he finds himself in a situation whose resolution seems impossible in terms of the market order of worth. And as can be gleaned from his scepticism on the Council’s ability to slow down the pace of licensing – a course of remedial action that would likely seek its legitimacy from the *industrial* and/or *civic* orders of worth – the expressive and material ordering of his work relations is such that alignment with a different order of worth is not straightforward either. The result is the enfeeblement, if not disablement, of critique.

In the second extract, we come across yet another disconcerting consequence of the increased supply of PHV drivers: desperation for money. Taken from my one-time engagement with British Pakistani PHV driver Aziz, the first half of it, interestingly, echoes critiques levelled by hackney carriage participants. Aziz seemed to share their views on both the lowering of standards in the PHV trade, as well as the role of local councils, whose actions in turning licensing into a ‘revenue spinner’ [to quote hackney participant Osman; see previous chapter] were seen as



violations of the *industrial* and *civic* ideals they were supposed to uphold. It should be noted that Aziz is a first-generation migrant from Azad Kashmir, Pakistan, who married into the ‘established’ British Asian community in Newcastle, thus making him a *mangetar* [‘fiancé’] – the colloquial Urdu/Hindi/Punjabi term for a foreign, migrant spouse. Upon hearing his critique of the leniency of licensing procedures and the inability of some PHV drivers to speak English, as quoted above, I told him that I found his response interesting as I had heard similar views from hackney participants, but seldom from PHV participants. In response, he told me: ‘Yeah, I have friends who are hacks. I agree with the hacks’. Considering that hackney carriage participants, including second-generation British Asians like Osman and Ali, mounted these critiques from the standpoint of the *industrial* order of worth, one might wonder if Aziz, too, leaned towards an industrial regime of justification.

There are several indications as to why this was not the case. First, Aziz’s role as a full-time Uber driver inhibits complete alignment with an industrial ordering of taxicab relations: space must be made for the *market* logics that form the conditions of possibility for Uber’s operation<sup>78</sup>, so it can continue to provide a living. Second, he mentioned that he often argues with his British-born wife that they should stop ‘relying on benefits’, which was indicative of an internalisation of neoliberal ‘scripts of the self’ in which a lack of self-reliance connotes unworthiness, and whose normativity has been linked by scholars to the rise of the market order (Lamont, 2019, pp. 667-68). And the third reason is one that brings me to the latter part of his statement, where he critiques *in terms of the market order* how certain Uber drivers – specifically Asians/Pakistanis – conduct themselves in the saturated market for transactions offered by the Uber app. This critique was premised on the understanding that ‘vanity’ and ‘enslavement to money’ mark the ‘inhuman limit’ of the market world (Boltanski and Thévenot, 2006, p. 203). This limit is not to be confused with states of unworthiness, for instance a product that is not desired or a market

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<sup>78</sup> I have previously mentioned cross-border hiring and a weakened, deregulated licensing regime, conducive to rapid increases in the supply side, as examples of these logics.

actor who fails to make a profit, both of which can still maintain a deficient presence in the market world. Rather, it refers to the point beyond which the conceptions of common humanity and common dignity underpinning the market order no longer hold, because the distinction between human market actors and the non-human market worth they possess has ceased to exist: the former have reduced themselves to the latter (Boltanski and Thévenot, 2006, p. 80). It is precisely to prevent this loss of common humanity and common dignity that market actors ought to hold ‘an attitude of *wise detachment* toward material wealth’ (p. 203; emphasis added).

The account given by Aziz suggests that in the saturated market of Uber driving today, this limit has, unfortunately, been breached. In expressing indignation at those PHV (Uber) drivers who mindlessly ‘chase after the money’ and ‘take anything they can get’, he not only cast them into a state of unworthiness, but also implied that their desperation was so corrosive as to actively undermine the achievement of equivalence among *all* sellers in the market for Uber driving. They had become so possessed by vanity that money [market worth] always seemed to be ‘running away’ from them; the indictment, put simply, was that they were *degrading* themselves in the market world. Here, then, we encounter an interesting instance of a PHV (Uber) driver who, despite his own struggles to qualify as market actor, mounts a critique of *selfishness that has run awry*, violating the confines of common humanity and dignity in the market world. Just like Ajay, Aziz recognised that it was in Uber’s interest to increase supply, telling me that any attempts to curtail this increase were likely to fail as the company ‘pays millions of pounds to HMRC in tax’. And he seemed even less hopeful about any remedial action from Council officials, who he believed had developed a vested interest in maximising revenue from taxicab licensing – an interest that indicated that they, too, had become market actors. All in all, both Ajay and Aziz shared a similar assessment: since the oversupply problem cannot be resolved in terms of the market order of worth, the pursuant difficulties they face – low fares, remote surge, increased wait times, and a persistent failure to qualify as market actors – are likely to continue. And if Aziz’s statement is any indication, blame will partly be redirected towards PHV (Uber) drivers

themselves. How, then, can these drivers envision a way forward, and redeem their self-worth? The upcoming, final section delves into some possibilities speculated upon by participants, and the limitations they may face.

### ***One-man Business, or the Conned Mark?***

At the beginning of this chapter, we noted that there were certain qualities of Uber from which PHV (Uber) participants drew their own worth as market actors: the competitive edge it has in the demand for taxicab services; the convenience and affordability enabled by the Uber app as market device; and, relatedly, the cultivation of market attachments in customers who routinely use the app. As the chapter progressed, we observed that while a number of participants did affirm these qualities, they fell short of meeting a more critical test for qualification in the *market* world: the ability to make a profit. The only exception to this was surge pricing: a liminal, ephemeral space wherein they *can* envisage themselves as worthy sellers, but which is, much to their chagrin, receding from view. The chapter has thus moved from examining everyday tests and trials where meaningful enrolment in the market world appears fleetingly possible, to where it is repeatedly thwarted, and finally, as we saw in the foregoing section, where it seems impossible altogether. This trajectory of analysis was a deliberate strategy on my part, aimed at creating a contrast between qualification and failure of qualification that best underlines notable findings from fieldwork with PHV (Uber) participants.

To close this chapter, I want to return to and supplement something that I discussed at the very beginning: Asim's characterisation of his work activity as a 'one-man business', and his overall evaluation that he was 'very happy' as an independent seller or subcontractor linked with the Uber app. Perhaps this is a fitting moment to add that in the second of our two engagements<sup>79</sup>, Asim, too, expressed some doubts on whether the amount of worth he could acquire as an Uber

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<sup>79</sup> This engagement took place in January 2023, almost three months after the first one in October 2022.

driver was enough to sustain his view of himself as a worthy market actor. Speaking to me in an interview held at Fausto Coffee on Roker Beach in Sunderland, he noted very early on that the rate at which he is paid for Uber trips had ‘become a problem’ for him, because it had ‘gone down tremendously’. Citing an example of a regular trip, from Central Station in Newcastle to Tynemouth, he said that his earnings had reduced from £16 to £12, even though the price paid by customers was roughly the same. Clearly, then, Uber was raking in a greater share of fares as commission, and this had come to taint his prior conception of the company as a worthy market actor. The extract below provides more insight into his frustration with this development:

“The issue arises *when you’re underpaid*. So you charge a customer 20 pounds, you used to give me 16 pounds, now you give me 12 pounds. What’s the difference? Everything’s exactly the same. They’re [the customer] paying more. And I’m doing the same job. I’m going from A to B doing exactly the same ten miles using the same routes, why am I getting less!?”

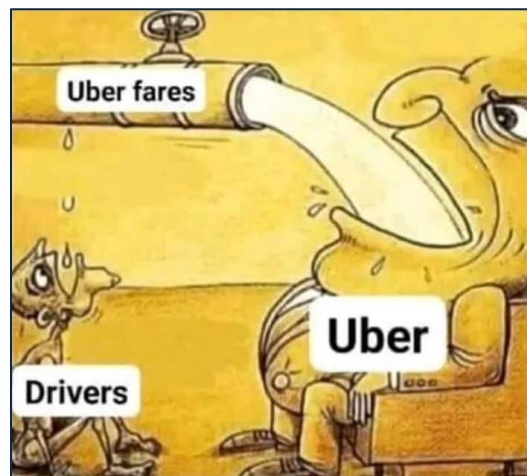
– Asim, Sunderland<sup>80</sup> PHV (Uber) driver, in-person interview, 10 January 2023

Hearing Asim speak about being ‘underpaid’ was quite astonishing, given his earlier assertions that anyone not happy with the terms offered to them by Uber ought to ‘do something else’. Crucially, however, his contention did *not* amount to a wholesale shift in his identification with self-employment: he still maintained that you have to learn how to strategize as an independent seller; take overall responsibility for your earnings [for instance by being ready for ‘doing zero’ on certain days, but ‘hundreds of pounds’ on other ones]; not treat Uber as an employer; and so forth. Rather, what the extract above tells us is that a relationship whereby both him *and* Uber were able to make a profit, thus imparting shared legitimacy to their activities, had been compromised: it is, in other words, an accusation of foul play against Uber as a market actor. The basis of this accusation was that a threshold against which he measured his own worth – a level of profit that

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<sup>80</sup> I base these labels on where my participants reside; in case they are licensed elsewhere, that is specified in the text.

was previously attainable – was no longer being met. The term ‘underpaid’ therefore connotes a share of profit that lies below this threshold, *not* an inadequate wage. He described this threshold as follows: ‘The rate [offered by Uber] should be at an average where you can earn a living. And which used to be the case. Like you used to be able to *make money*’. One only ‘makes money’ if the revenue earned is more than the costs that have to be paid out: in other words, if the model test of *profitability* is being met. It is the retraction of this possibility that had instigated Asim’s critique of Uber: he faulted the company for distorting what was a perfectly *just* commercial arrangement between two parties.



**Figure 18:** Meme shared on a Facebook group of Uber drivers in the UK, May 2024 (Facebook, 2024a)

It bears reminding that in our first engagement, he had staunchly defended this arrangement when he critiqued those PHV drivers who, in taking recourse to the courts, had sought to evade the requisites of participation in the market world. Interestingly, not only did he reiterate this critique in our second engagement, but also broadened its scope by encompassing unions, like the App Drivers and Couriers Union [ADCU], that have led litigation against Uber. One of many iterations of this critique is given below:

“Uber has changed the structure of how they pay people. That’s on the downside of people taking them to court, *where they have to get their money back out. If people didn’t take them to court,*

*they wouldn't have done that. But they need to make their money, they're a business as well. You have to understand that, yeah?* Instead of taking 25% commission, they're now taking something like 40%, because they're charging VAT<sup>81</sup>. But they don't show you that [the commission and the VAT], they just show the price to you as the customer and what I get as the driver...[ ]...They have to pay all these extra costs out.”

– Asim, Sunderland PHV (Uber) driver, in-person interview, 10 January 2023

The extract above complicates Asim's evaluation of the predicament he faces: it is not just Uber who hasn't held its end of the bargain, the same may be said for some Uber drivers. By pursuing what he regarded as misguided, eventually-counterproductive attempts to win workers' rights through the courts, they had forced Uber into a corner where it *had to* increase its rate of commission, and as a consequence, diminish the rate of profit made by *all* drivers. So one end, he was unhappy with the actions of these drivers. But on the other end, he expressed displeasure at Uber's actions, figuratively asking the company 'why am I getting less!?' – as if it were a plea from an upstanding market actor whose fate should not have been lumped with the others.

Upon asking him what, then, was the way forward, he paused for a moment and then hesitantly gave a surprising reply: 'the only way is to strike'. The reticent posture assumed while saying this was suggestive of his ambivalence on embracing this course of action. So too was what he began to expound upon immediately thereafter: his fears that the effectiveness of any strike action would be severely undercut by the actions of 'new', 'greedy' drivers, especially those who were 'Asians'. This concern echoed Aziz's critique of *apne log* [our people, i.e. Asians] who 'chase after the money', 'take anything they can get'. Both cases point towards an interesting figurational dynamic at play *within* the occupational space of Uber driving. While Aziz seemed to draw a link

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<sup>81</sup> On 6 December 2021, a High Court ruling classified Uber as the contractor [principal agent] for its transport services, rather than an intermediary agent for bookings. This meant that the company was obliged to charge 20% VAT to its customers (Topham, 2021; 2022). The High Court's judgement followed the Supreme Court's characterisation in 'Uber BV and others (Appellants) v Aslam and others (Respondents)' (2021) of Uber drivers as workers rather than independent contractors.

between desperation for money and not knowing ‘a word of English’, Asim associated greediness with ‘new’ drivers, those ‘not tenured’<sup>82</sup>, who fail to properly discriminate between good and bad jobs, and ‘suppress the chances of a surge’ for everybody else<sup>83</sup>. Even though these drivers may be part of the same community as these participants, they were cast as a group of ‘newcomers’ or ‘outsiders’, and the image of their behaviour inferred from ‘the minority of the worst’ in that group (Elias, 1994, pp. 102, 158).

The ambivalent positioning exhibited by Asim with respect to the future enables me to introduce an excerpt from an article by Goffman (1952), in which he discussed a range of strategies for adaptations to failure by a type of actor [‘mark’] who had been ‘conned’, or found that the self-conception based on which they defined their worth could no longer be supported by reality:

“Another line of action which a mark who refuses to be cooled can pursue is that of turning “sour.” The term derives from the argot of industry but the behavior it refers to occurs everywhere. The mark outwardly accepts his loss but *withdraws all enthusiasm, good will, and vitality from whatever role he is allowed to maintain*. He complies with the formal requirements of the role that is left him, but he *withdraws his spirit and identification from it*.”

– Goffman (1952, p. 459; emphasis added)

The situation Goffman analyses – one in which a social actor is faced with a failure to substantiate with supports from reality a conception of self from which an identity, and by implication worth, is derived – closely resembles the predicament faced by PHV participants in qualifying themselves

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<sup>82</sup> When asked who would qualify as a ‘tenured’ Uber driver, Asim replied that it would be anyone who has worked on the Uber app for at least a year; anything less than that makes it likely that they have not ‘figured it out yet’.

<sup>83</sup> This scenario is well illustrated through a simple example. You are in a café and order an Uber to go home. There are three Uber drivers in the vicinity, and they are offered four pounds for the trip. If none of them accept the job, the algorithm will ‘ping’ them again with a higher rate, say six pounds. If they still refuse to accept it, the price may increase even further. However, if one of them takes the first offer of four pounds, then the possibility of any further increases cannot materialise. And on a busy night, individual enactments of such behaviour may agglomerate into preventing a surge from taking effect. This is the behaviour being attributed to ‘new’ and ‘greedy’ drivers.

as *market* actors. With respect to the response of ‘turning sour’, withdrawal from identification with a role may be reframed as a withdrawal from one’s situatedness in the market order of worth. In this context, engaging with the aforementioned elaboration of what ‘turning sour’ involves is useful as it opens up the possibility of evaluating a range of responses that were exhibited by PHV participants against the response described. What we observed in Asim’s hesitant reply about striking can be taken as approaching, but not yet adopting, this response. Going on strike, as we know, is a form of *industrial* action, and clearly deciding to support it would amount to abandoning, if not openly denouncing, an identification with the market world. It would also amount to embracing something that he had himself criticised in the past, and continues to blame for the predicament in which he finds himself. It unsettled him. But with no other resolution in sight, he had been brought to the precipice of considering it. He *came close* to ‘turning sour’. That this can be gleaned about someone who was perhaps the most market-aligned actor I met in the course of my fieldwork is quite revealing about the perceived legitimacy of work relations in Uber driving today.

With the exception of Asim and another deviant case, Tom, all PHV participants I spoke to in the course of this project can be categorised as having already accepted that they were a ‘conned mark’, even though in the absence of alternatives they continued to ‘fulfil the formal requirements’ of their role as Uber drivers (Goffman, 1952). It may be said that they were already in the place to which Asim had come close at the time of our second engagement. A key indicator of this was their response to a question quoted earlier about where they placed themselves on the spectrum between being self-employed versus employed by Uber, irrespective of how the company framed their role. Whereas Asim had strongly affirmed the role of self-employment as it is conceived in the market order, the majority of PHV participants never expressed such a view. In the same conversation where Ajay quipped that ‘first they [Uber] feed you, then they starve you’, he also told me that he was ‘kind of self-employed, *but Uber is the boss*’, playfully smiling at



the second bit. Martin, a veteran Newcastle PHV driver who alternated between working with local cab company Blueline and on the Uber app, gave a more pointed answer: ‘I’m not completely self-employed *as I cannot set the price*’. Perhaps the most revealing response was by Aziz, who just burst out laughing, making it clear that he wasn’t going to respond any further to my question.

Did these participants also embrace industrial action? Not really. As can be observed for instance in Ajay’s statement in the previous section, they were afflicted by ambivalence on their situatedness in *any* order of worth. After failing again and again in qualifying themselves as market actors, a failure whose intricacies have been examined over the course of this chapter, they had found themselves in a place where it was increasingly clear that the reality of their work relations will not match up to that self-conception. But given how those work relations are organised, situating themselves in a different order of worth is not straightforward either. As a result, they are effectively ‘worldless’. The only course of action they are left with is to pull back, withdraw their identification with the market order, avoid the recurring frustration and exhaustion it causes them. Their work activity was thus marked less by vigour, more by reluctance: they had ‘turned sour’ in their role as Uber drivers. The frame is appropriate precisely because it refers to a situation where continuity in the role is not interrupted.

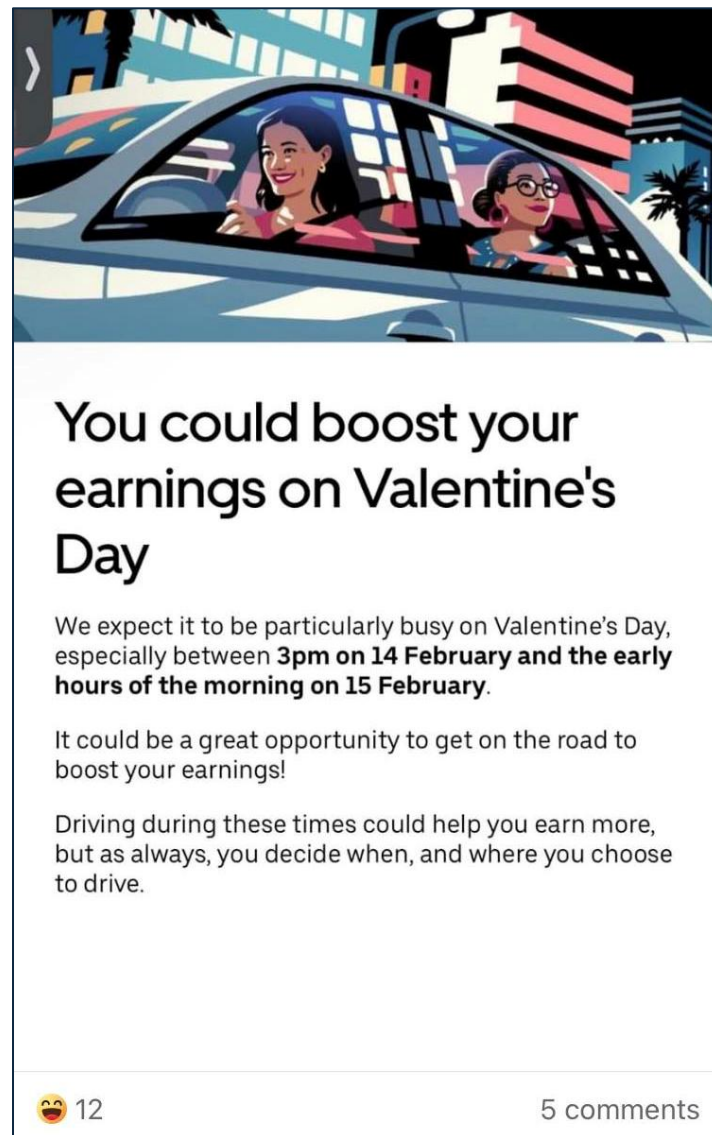
‘Turning sour’, then, was observed to be a widespread response to the failure to self-qualify as market actors among PHV (Uber) participants in this project. There were, however, some instances of PHV participants not just expressing support for, but also *partaking in* industrial action. As I was writing this chapter, in February 2024, Uber drivers across the UK, US and Canada went on strike on Valentines Day, to protest against both the low value of fares and increases in commission, along with a range of other issues – some of which will be taken up in the next chapter. I came to know about this strike through a message from David on 13 February, one day before the strike: he sent me a screenshot of a Facebook post that shared an in-app message Uber drivers had received on that day, which to them essentially hinted at increased

chances of higher earnings during the strike [see Figure 19 below]. Of course, there was plausible deniability to this being a response to the strike: it could just have been a normal message about Valentine's Day. Even if so, it is interesting because it tells us that any explicit or implicit acknowledgement of strike action, which draws its legitimacy from the industrial order of worth, would amount to a grave contradiction with how Uber frames its drivers. As can be gleaned from the dozen laugh reactions on the Facebook post, as well as three more laugh emojis that David sent along with the screenshot, Uber drivers had sensed, and made light of, this contradiction in the in-app message they had received.

Having become aware of the strike, I asked David if he would be partaking in it, and what he thought about its effectiveness. He said yes, and that while it would likely be undermined by opportunistic drivers looking to capitalise on a possible supply shortage – some of whom 'will be having a right laugh' about it – it might still make a mark, particularly as it was being coordinated with a parallel strike on the Uber Eats platform, *and* was also taking place across the Atlantic. I messaged him again the next day, and he seemed hopeful that this had been the case. Since David only occasionally worked on the Uber app, I also messaged full-time PHV (Uber) participant Obi, and found out that he, too, had been on strike. However, upon opening the Uber app on strike day, a number of vehicles could be seen on the map, and the lead time for pick-up was still below five minutes.

In conclusion, then, while the findings of this study indicate that 'turning sour' remains the most prevalent response to the ever-too-remote, worsening prospect of a market qualification among PHV (Uber) drivers, the possibility that they are beginning to actively contest their predicament of being 'worldless' by resorting to strike action – a grievance mechanism that derives its legitimacy from the industrial world – cannot be discounted either. Whether or not it makes any material difference to their work relations remains to be seen, but for now, we may

conclude with a hint of optimism expressed by David: 'hopefully they [the strikes] will become more frequent'.



**Figure 19:** Screenshot of a Facebook post sharing an in-app message on the Uber app, received one day before Uber drivers went on strike in the UK, US and Canada

### 5.3 ‘Head in the Sand’: The Fragmented Terrain of Connexionist Worth in the PHV (Uber) Sector

#### *Seamless Mediation via the Uber Platform*

At about 8pm on 23 September 2022, I met private hire participant David for what was to be my first ‘ride-along’ participant-observation session. I had started fieldwork only a month prior, and was very excited that after conducting several sit-down interviews, I would finally get to be inside a cab on the move and have a ‘real feel’ for what it’s like to be a taxicab driver. Together with Alistair and Darlene, David was one of the first three taxicab drivers [two hackney, one PHV; all based in Durham] who had signed up to participate in my research. For the first month, I conducted bi-weekly interviews with these participants at various coffee shops in Durham town centre, alternating our engagements such that I would have an interview or two scheduled every week. I had done two interviews each when David agreed to take me along for a ride-along. Little did I know at this point that he would end up being the participant with whom I would have, by far, the most engagements<sup>84</sup>, although looking back perhaps there was an incipient expectation that I would strike a particularly good connection with him. For the ride-along, he proposed heading together to Newcastle Airport when he was due to pick-up one of his customers there, and then for me to make my own way back to Durham. The majority of these airport customers were repeat business, and all booked David directly, as he is licensed not only as a PHV driver but also an independent PHV operator<sup>85</sup>. I agreed to pay him £40 for the one-way trip, equivalent to what he usually charged at the time [it would later increase to £50]. However, two days prior to our engagement, he messaged that he was willing to take me to the airport and back for the same

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<sup>84</sup> As noted previously, we had a total of 22 in-person engagements over a span of 11 months. We have remained in touch on the phone since.

<sup>85</sup> Several participants including David reported that becoming licensed as a ‘one-man’ or small private hire operator is more of a possibility in County Durham than in Newcastle, where there has been a steady trend towards monopolisation in the PHV sector. The same is true for access to well-remunerated contract work, which is increasingly mediated by larger firms in Newcastle but remains available to individual hackney and PHV drivers in Durham.

amount if I could meet the next day instead – a bargain in terms of both cost and the time offered, to which I readily agreed.

As I move towards dissecting the presence of the *connexionist* or ‘projective’ order of worth (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005) in PHV participants’ everyday lives – the last of the three orders that shape economic relations in the taxicab trade – I begin by expounding upon some observations from my ride-along with David as he was the participant who most vividly demonstrated a recognition of logics from all three of these orders. Each order had certain features that he identified with and accorded worth to, as well as those that he critiqued, regularly shifting his moral standpoint in the process. One example of this nuanced perspective, which has been partly elaborated upon in the past two chapters, is him valuing certain features of the *industrial* order that formed the basis of critiques levelled by hackney carriage participants, for example enforcement as a mechanism of control, yet at the same time attributing worth to the Uber app in terms of certain virtues from the *market* and *connexionist* orders. Starting off in 2007 as a young Durham private hire before obtaining a dual [hackney-PHV] and a PHV operator license and building up his own one-man PHV business, and then returning for another stint as a hackney driver during the festive season of 2022, he was someone who had stepped in and out of different ‘taxi worlds’ over almost 17 years in the occupation. In addition to his brief return to hackney work that I was able to follow during my fieldwork, he continued to assume an interpenetrative, hybrid positioning in relation to two distinct variations of PHV work: as an independent operator, and via the Uber app.

After picking me up for the aforementioned ride-along, David took me to Newcastle Airport on what was mostly a motorway journey. We went past the 15 minute drop-off area that he usually drove through for his airport runs, and then briefly entered a small car park where a number of PHVs were waiting for pick-ups; in his estimation the majority of these were awaiting ‘pings’ on the Uber app. Right next to this car park was a petrol station, with a small shop that

sold the usual variety of unhealthy snacks as well as a Gregg's branch, closed at the time. David remarked that he had been to this Gregg's 'a million times', linking his reliance on this branch to a broader point about the scarce availability, or spatial spread, of healthy food for taxicab drivers on the move. Throughout the first part of the journey, he shared observations relating to his work as an independent PHV operator – the variation of PHV work through which he fulfils airport bookings. He joyfully spoke about airport customers he had known for years, who always asked about his family, and readily shared details of the holidays or business trips from where they'd just returned. Once we had left the airport and were heading south, I asked him whether he also took any airport bookings through the Uber app. He responded that while they were frequently offered, he rarely accepted them because 'long distance trips on Uber are rubbish value'. Success at building up a sufficient clientele of loyal airport customers had largely removed the need to rely on cheaper, borderline unprofitable fares offered by Uber. However, the Uber app still formed an integral part of his work routine for airport runs: if he had a pick-up, he would 'set destination' as the airport on the app to earn money on the way there; and if he had a drop-off, he would set Durham as his destination afterwards and earn money on the way back.

As we were passing Gateshead on our way back to Durham, David began to demonstrate to me how this feature ['set destination'] works in practice. He placed his phone on the mount, opened up the Uber app, and input 'DH1' [Durham] as his destination, telling me that the app should now 'ping' him for any trips that matched our route. While trips lying *exactly* on the designated route were not guaranteed, he suggested with some confidence that there was a considerable chance of some trips not deviating too far from the route being offered. Crucially, it was *not* the monetary value of these trips, which minimises 'dead miles' and adds onto the profit margin of his own bookings, that was counted as their foremost benefit. Rather, it was how the Uber app facilitated him in rapidly enrolling into 'the most diverse and remote kinds of connection' (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005, p. 108) *along the course of his own, non-Uber*

*journeys* that took precedence, forming the basis of his justification as to why it was desirable to supplement his own bookings with less profitable, sometimes breakeven ones offered by the app. We could say that what the app didn't provide in terms of money, it made up for by making trips 'fit' into David's schedule. The following extract provides more insight into this mode of reasoning:

"So the other day, I don't know just somewhere near Neville's Cross traffic lights, I got a job from there to Durham [city centre]. I then got another job from Durham to Chester Le Street. Okay, I just dropped them off and I got a job from Chester-le-Street to Washington. Okay, I got a job from Washington to Central Station in Newcastle. Yeah? And then I started driving towards the airport as I had to pick somebody up there and I got a job to the airport! So it was literally five jobs that *linked up perfectly* and brought me to the airport you know. So that was a lucky turn of events, that was the *perfect Uber experience*."

– David, Durham PHV (own operator + Uber) driver, ride-along, 23 September 2022

David's fond memory of the 'perfect Uber experience' sheds light upon a positive evaluation of Uber that is tied to the virtue of *mediation* in the connexionist order of worth. Whereas in the previous chapter we had observed participants like Asim and Tom praising certain capabilities of the Uber app as a *market device*, in the extract above David is attributing worth to its role as a *platform* that spurs *connections* across an expansive network of riders and drivers. Millions of riders and hundreds of thousands of 'partner-drivers' enrol into 'temporary, but reactivatable connections' (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005, p. 104) via this platform on a regular basis. Each time a rider requests a booking on the app, and a driver accepts that request, they animate a tiny section of the overall *network* of Uber users, and in every such instance the Uber platform advances the virtue of *mediation* in the connexionist order. Since this mediation cannot be enacted without the partner-drivers also fulfilling their role, they, too, acquire connexionist worth by partaking in it.

Over the course of our 11 months' acquaintance, David shared on a handful of occasions that the Uber app had very recently offered him jobs that lined up perfectly with one another; each time he was teeming with excitement, almost as if working these jobs had made his day. Such experiences allow him to momentarily conceive of himself as the 'great man' in the connexionist world, who is always *engaged* in linking up with others, effortlessly surfing from one connection to the next (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005, p. 112). This attribution of self-worth derives from a reality test whereby status – of both objects and persons – is measured against the higher common principle of *activity*: activity that is aimed at making *connections*, advancing *mediation* and extending *networks*, irrespective of its value in a monetary, functional/professional or any other sense. When subjected to this test, the seamlessness and rapidity of connections made by the Uber platform supersedes any other arrangement or form of taxicab driving, and this is what we see reflected in David's positive evaluation above.

Here, then, we learn that the Uber app may be valued independently of the key test of *profitability* in the market world, even if that test remains most pertinent to the manner in which PHV (Uber) participants evaluate their work activity in line with the polity model. There is a parallel form of valuation at play, one whereby the app's function of 'algorithmic matching' (Möhlmann et al., 2021; Wiener et al., 2023) is subjected to judgement in terms of the connexionist maxim of *activity*. It should be noted that I take this notion of algorithmic matching to include the automated pairing of riders with drivers, but *not* dynamic pricing, as in previous work (Möhlmann et al., 2021). The rationale behind this is that these two functions – matching on one end, and pricing on the other – tended to be evaluated separately: one in terms of the connexionist order, the other in terms of the market order. The moral complexity at play pointed towards a certain *compromise* (Thévenot, 2002) between the market and connexionist orders in everyday evaluations undertaken by PHV (Uber) drivers, whereby each was allowed to stand in relation to *particular* attributes of their work activity. As Thévenot says, 'compromises are not



simply juxtaposed justifications. They become solid because they are built up and reinforced over time, *being entrenched within material arrangements*' (2002, p. 9; emphasis added). We have already examined how numerous aspects of the socio-material work environment inhabited by PHV (Uber) drivers, notably their encounters with the algorithmic mechanisms of surge and dynamic pricing, are aligned with, and effectuate, a *market* form of coordination. With the extract above, we have now begun to learn that interactions with other features of the app, such as 'set destination', embed a measure of *connexionist* worth, and that this form of worth can – at least to some extent – make up for a deficiency of market worth.

The manner in which a *market-connexionist* compromise appeared in participants' accounts was not limited to the form it took for David, for whom a negative evaluation [pricing] coexisted with a positive one [matching]. A different variation can be gleaned from the following extract, taken from my first engagement with PHV (Uber) participant Asim:

"Bro, 15 years ago there was no such thing as ride-hailing apps. You had to go to the roads and flag down a cab, or you had to go to your local station and get a cab. Bro, ride-hailing apps are here. Ride-hailing apps are the future. Technology is the future. *This* is the future [\*points to his phone on the mount, on which the Uber app is open and active\*]. Embrace it. If you don't like tech, if you don't like all this, then bro, why have you got a new iPhone, a new Samsung, iPads, laptops, all this technology? Get rid of everything and stay in the 1970s. No one's stopping you. Who's stopping you? *If you don't like change, stay at home...* [...] So, I think ride-hailing apps is a secure future, ride-hailing apps will always be there. In five years' time, there might be another ride-hailing app."

– Asim, Sunderland PHV (Uber) driver, ride-along, 12 October 2022

Asim's critique of those who refuse to embrace change, specifically technological change, provides insight into how the controversy of Uber's rise pertains not just to a shift in the economic ordering of taxicab driving, but equally the role technological actants – specifically ride-hailing apps – have played in instigating that shift; it can therefore be seen as a *technoeconomic* controversy. This

critique followed my counterposing<sup>86</sup> of his positive evaluation of Uber based on the *demand* for its service, as examined in the previous chapter on the market order, with industrial-oriented critiques levelled at the company by hackney carriage participants. To briefly recall that extract, he mentioned being ‘loyal to the technology’ of ride-hailing apps rather than to Uber per se, and that he was ready to switch to whichever new platform snatches demand away from Uber in the future. When probed on his response to concerns that this form of technology-enabled work was driving the weakening of supply side controls, and thus will dampen earnings for everyone in the occupation, he undertook a type of unveiling that Boltanski and Thévenot (2006) call a *reversal*<sup>87</sup>: ‘attributing value to the common good of a different polity (unveiling in the sense of recognizing true worth)’ (p. 219). It didn’t matter that the mechanism of *control* in the industrial order was being eroded, as the quality of ride-hailing apps as a cutting edge, technologically-advanced *instrument of connection* – recognised by not just taxicab drivers, but also the wider public – was what really mattered. Anyone who refuses to ‘embrace’ the reorganisation of their work activity by way of this instrument is cast into a state of unworthiness, especially when they have no problem benefitting from technological advancements otherwise: ‘Get rid of everything and stay in the 1970s’. This qualification of technology as a means of opening new possibilities for *mediation* is a key feature of the *connexionist* world, wherein it is ‘normal to find a marked presence of new communication technologies based on *computer science* (Internet, interfaces, etc.)’ (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005, p. 118).

That Asim chose to shift the terms of our discussion from the *industrial* to the *connexionist* order, and not the *market* order, may be said to reinforce the point made in the

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<sup>86</sup> A similar strategy was pursued in my engagements with hackney carriage participants, to whom I presented critiques levelled at the hackney trade by PHV (Uber) drivers – like the one being examined here – and inquired about their response.

<sup>87</sup> To give another abstract example: if one were to view the controversial phenomenon of cross-bordering by Wolverhampton-licensed PHVs from the standpoint of the *market* world, it would indeed be considered desirable, as it increases *competition* between sellers in the taxicab trade, and through *market devices* like the Uber app, facilitates the enactment of *transactions* regardless of where buyers and sellers may be located.

previous chapter that in terms of tests tied to that order, like that of *profitability*, the work activity of Uber driving is far from likely to lead to a worthy qualification. In contrast, the Uber app's capacity to spur connections at a rate that surpasses all previous configurations of taxicab driving is read as being durable, as dependable enough to be drawn on as 'equipment' in the mounting of a counter-critique (Boltanski and Thévenot, 2006). The counter-critique that we see in the extract above was aimed primarily at disarming critiques levelled from an *industrial* standpoint. But since it was originally prompted by me raising those critiques in response to his enthusiastic attribution of worth to the Uber app in terms of the *demand* for its service, it is also indicative of a *market-connexionist* compromise whereby one positive qualification [demand] is buttressed by another [mediation]. Whilst these two evaluations are intrinsically interlinked, one could very well argue that the former *follows* the latter: without the possibilities ushered in by the modern technology of ride-hailing apps, taxicab drivers would still find themselves waiting around for the chance to enrol into a transaction, unable to 'match' with their customers in real-time. To put this in terms of the terminology used in the last chapter, we can say that the demand garnered by the Uber app as a *market device*, as well as the *market attachments* it fosters in its customers, would not have been possible without its qualities as a *platform*, an *instrument of connection*, which acquire meaning in relation to the *connexionist* world.

Taken together, the two extracts examined in this section have begun to reveal the manner in which connexionist worth has entered, and now figures in, the occupational space of taxicab driving. In David's case, it makes up for a deficiency of market worth, and in Asim's case, it both provides a resource with which to rebut critiques from an industrial standpoint, and reinforces – or arguably upholds entirely – a market qualification based on demand ['these days most people order a cab *through* ride-hailing apps']. This entry of connexionist logics follows a broader, cumulative shift in the normative underpinnings of capitalism of which 21<sup>st</sup> century, 'Big Tech' firms like Uber are one manifestation, and which formed the object of Boltanski and Chiapello's

(2005) sociohistorical analysis in *The New Spirit of Capitalism*. Beginning at the end of the 1970s and continuing into the present, this shift has entailed both the extension of a market form of coordination to hitherto differently-organised spheres<sup>88</sup> of [particularly economic] life, as well as the gradual formation of a new, distinct polity that sometimes exceeds, at other times contradicts this logic (2005, p.137): one organised around the figures of the *network* and the *project*.

As noted in the theoretical overview earlier, the *network* refers to the always-mobile web of flows involving different actants, while the *project* is an event whereby certain links in a network are stabilised for a temporal span durable enough for equivalence and shared judgement to be achieved (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005, pp. 104-105). Given that a wide array of activities may be subsumed into the grammar of the project – from school plays, to part-time work, to renovating one’s apartment (p. 111) – we may pose the question if, in a granular sense, every individual Uber trip undertaken by PHV (Uber) drivers can be counted as a project in itself, with the workday conceived of as a succession of projects. In relation to David’s account of the ‘perfect Uber experience’ in the first extract, several indications might support such a move: each trip that he enrolls in may be said to animate and possibly extend [in case of newly-registered riders] the overall *network* of the Uber platform; differences in terms of route and the nature of encounters with riders may impart a degree of uniqueness to each trip [or project]; and each trip may be said to further his own worth, along with that of the Uber app as a technological actant, in terms of the maxim of *activity* in the connexionist world. Furthermore, minimal gaps between one job and the next may support the view that the most paramount, ‘model’ test in the connexionist order – that of the ability to transition from one project to the next, on a recurrent basis – is also met (ibid.).

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<sup>88</sup> The shift towards independent-contractor status in the taxicab trade is one example of this (see Dubal, 2017; Thelen, 2018; Minchin, 2020). The same is true for the relaxation of qualitative controls, like the requirement for route tests, in the UK – a process that, as discussed earlier, accelerated after the arrival of Uber (see Chapter 2.2, ‘Shake It Up: Platformisation and the Controversial Rise of Uber’ earlier in the thesis).

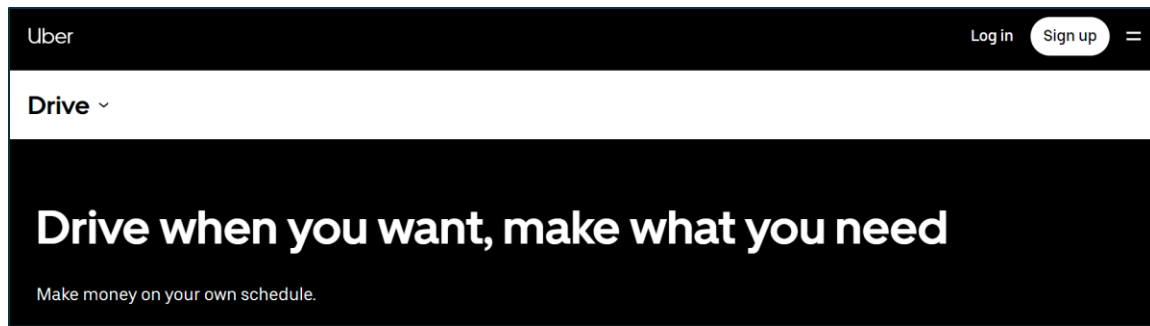
These indications notwithstanding, the question of what kinds of activities qualify as a project in the context of Uber driving, and whether or not individual Uber trips fall into that category, cannot be answered with a standalone consideration of how the principal virtues of *activity* and *mediation* were mobilised in participants' accounts, as undertaken in this section. Rather, it requires an examination, in relation to empirical data, of the presence of a range of virtues, mechanisms and associated tests that together comprise a holistic, coherent framework/regime of justification vis-à-vis the connexionist order. It is in relation to this framework – the entire set of virtues and the tests tied to them – that the notion of *project* obtains meaning in the connexionist order. The remainder of this chapter will therefore juxtapose several key constituent ideals of this framework with empirical findings, in order to assess the extent to which the relations inhabited by PHV participants match up to, and allow the attribution of self-worth in line with, the connexionist order. The question of what might qualify as a project in this context will form part of this assessment, and has been postulated now so it can be referred back to, and clarified, over the coming sections. Let us now resume this task by examining of how the virtue of *flexibility* figured in PHV participants' everyday lives.

### ***Flexible Beings***

If we recall the beginning of the previous chapter, Asim's attribution of worth to Uber based on the *demand* for its service went hand in hand with his conception of himself as a self-employed, independent *seller* in the market world. I had suggested at that point that his strong identification with self-employment resonates with Uber's motto of 'Be Your Own Boss'; he seemed to agree with the Silicon Valley firm that an ideal 'partner-driver' is one who is self-employed, takes responsibility for the conduct of their business, and so forth. Yet the manner in which Uber frames its drivers does not just draw on the *market* order of worth. It equally, if not more so, mobilises a repertoire of partnership agreements that is a feature of the *connexionist* world: 'If everyone possesses the capacity to relate, and thus to constitute a link in a network, some people realize

this potential in their person in exemplary fashion...[ ]...such equally are *customers*, *suppliers* and *subcontractors* when they enter into *relations of partnership*' (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005, p. 115). The figure of the 'partner-driver' therefore fuses the roles of an independent *seller* from the market world, and that of a *partner* from the connexionist world.

The ideal *partner* is one who engages in multiple *projects*, and whose *activity* in making *connections* and extending *networks* 'surmounts the oppositions between work and non-work, the stable and the unstable, wage-earning class and non-wage-earning class, paid work and voluntary work, that which may be assessed in terms of productivity and that which, not being measurable, eludes calculable assessment' (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005, p. 109). I noted above that in the connexionist world, various undertakings can qualify as projects, including those that pertain to what would customarily be considered 'personal' or 'family' affairs. Someone who is able to move between these different domains freely, who is *flexible* enough to do so, can acquire worth from *all* such activities. *Flexibility* is thus another important virtue in the connexionist world. While taxi work has always been known for the flexibility it offers, for instance in terms of setting one's own schedule (Occhiuto, 2017), Uber's lexicon of 'partner-drivers' mobilises it directly in line with a *connexionist* regime of justification: it is desirable for an Uber driver to be flexible as this allows them to advance *mediation* among riders and drivers, maximise *activity* by taking trips whenever and wherever they want, and thus be the perfect *partner* to Uber's operation. See, for example, the current tagline on the Uber website for drivers looking to sign up to the platform, which places this virtue front and centre:



**Figure 20:** Tagline on the 'Drive for Uber' page on Uber's website (GB), screenshot, 4 April 2024

The tagline above implies that the ideal 'partner-driver' is not just one who is a self-employed, competent *market* actor, but also a *flexible being*: someone who *enrols* into the *network* of the Uber platform as and when needed, plays their part in extending that network, switches over to other projects, and returns once again. In this sense the work activity of Uber driving may be understood as a single, recurrent project that has its place besides other projects, or as a collection of unique projects [individual trips] initiated within the same network, as suggested in the previous section.

Whilst enrolment into this project is driven first and foremost by the pursuit of *market* worth – the difficulties of which were analysed in the previous chapter – I came across some instances where PHV (Uber) participants were seen to affirm the virtue of *flexibility* in and of itself, making it the basis of a *connexionist* qualification of themselves and their work activity that stood independently of any *market* evaluations. Remember Asim telling us about his business strategy of logging onto the app as early as 6am in the morning, in order to capitalise on 'big jobs' and hit his numbers early? The successful deployment of this strategy formed the basis of his qualification of himself as a worthy *seller* in the *market* world. However, a further examination of the same conversation will reveal that another qualification – one premised on the virtue of *flexibility* – was also at play:

Salman: "But what are the odds of you getting that first big job [in the morning]?"

Asim: “95%. Today I got out 8 o’clock, 12 o’clock I was home. Four hours I worked, that was it. I went home, went to the shops, I washed my car, popped into the takeaway [owned by brother]. What job can you do that, that lets you do this? For me, flexibility is the biggest thing. Flexibility is the *biggest* thing. I can work, I can quickly finish it up, I can help my wife [with childcare], I can go to the mosque. No job lets you do that.”

– Interview exchange, ride-along, 12 October 2022

The extract above reveals a range of *projects* that Asim enrolls in on a day-to-day basis: helping out with an Indian takeaway run by his brother; partnering with his wife in caring responsibilities for their six month old daughter and household chores; and involvement in his local faith community. In our subsequent, second engagement on 10 January 2023, he shared with me that he used to work as a full-time chef at the takeaway prior to taking up taxicab driving<sup>89</sup>, and while he had been doing the latter full-time since, he was still able to lend a hand now and then as he had retained the requisite *skills* to do so. Since the notion of *skill* in the connexionist world combines ‘the qualities of the person and the properties of their labour-power’ (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005, p. 155), it denotes a reserve of abilities that is accumulated over a succession of projects, yet exceeds any single one of them. Asim’s exercise of skills acquired in a previous primary project, however momentary, could thus continue to add onto the sum total of *activity* against which he measured his worth. It comes to be particularly valuable when one of his family members needs to take time off, as was the case with his brother on the day of our second engagement. I remember him smiling as he said, ‘I cooked for lunchtime, gave him a day off’, his buoyant demeanour being indicative of an attribution of self-worth based on his capability to step in where needed, to be that ‘periodic contributor’ who makes a difference (ibid.). This capability to *plug in / out* of his brother’s takeaway was enabled by the affordances of his current primary project of work on the Uber app, which while being subject to the spatiotemporal constraints of

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<sup>89</sup> This transition from takeaway to taxi work formed an important focus of Virinder Kalra’s study (2006) of the British Asian community.



*market* rhythms, was evaluated as the configuration of taxicab driving that most closely embodies the ideal of *flexibility* in the connexionist world. Compared to a local cab company, which may have required him to remain ‘on call’ for the entirety of his designated shift, the Uber app leaves him free to enrol and re-enrol as he deems fit – maximising his *availability* to integrate himself into other projects.

Besides the takeaway, another such project was that of his family: he accorded worth to himself for being actively involved in his daughter’s upbringing. Setting up a contrast to ‘overworking’, ‘absent’ British Asian fathers, he drew on a conception of family life that is consistent with the connexionist order, whereby voluntary, domestic work is not in any way inferior to paid work; the test of *activity* applies to *both* these domains, and others. Sharing childcare responsibilities with his wife – being a good *partner* in the home – was therefore a matter of pride; it set an example that, in his view, ought to be followed more widely. Once again, his *activity* in this domain was facilitated by the *flexibility* afforded by his work activity as an Uber driver, which led him to evaluate it as more *worthy* than other jobs. More specifically, his remark that ‘flexibility is the *biggest* thing’ makes clear that the *overall* evaluation of his work activity followed from a compromise between the *market* and *connexionist* orders of worth.

It bears reminding here that every moral evaluation I came across in my fieldwork stemmed from particular tests and trials participants face in the course of everyday life, which arise in *spatiotemporally specific* moments, and in relation to different aspects of their work activity. No evaluation was absolute; it was always intrinsically tied to particular tests and trials. In the extract above, Asim steered our conversation from the market tests of *opportunism* and *profitability* [I strategically enrol myself into ‘big jobs’, and quickly earn a profit] towards the connexionist test of *activity* [I am engaged in all these projects], and in meeting that test, the *flexibility* offered by the Uber app did supersede any considerations of market worth. Since he attributed worth to himself along both these lines, we may say that a *connexionist* qualification

came to buttress a *market* qualification, similar to what we observed in the last section. What we are seeing is the ‘moral complexity of an equipped humanity’: the ability to switch between, and derive worth from, multiple orders of worth (Thévenot, 2002).

A similar dynamic was observed in my conversation with Iranian PHV (Uber) driver Ahmet, part of which is given below:

“I used to work at a restaurant here [in Newcastle], but a couple of years ago I decided to do Uber instead. I think it’s better – there’s less responsibility in a way, and I get to spend much more time with my son and wife than I used to. *So I’m happy, even though it’s cheap.*”

– Ahmet, Newcastle PHV (Uber) driver, ride-along, 22 April 2023

Ahmet’s critique of ‘very cheap’, unprofitable Uber fares was noted in the previous chapter. Here, we learn that it was coupled with a positive qualification of his work activity in terms of the virtue of *flexibility* in the *connexionist* order of worth. Money is not all that matters – equally important is the ability to be there for his young son. Even if the Uber app routinely failed to meet the test of *profitability* in the market world, the way in which it supported his *activity* in the family on a day-to-day basis could – at least to some extent – make up for that deficiency. Assuming the standpoint of the *connexionist* order provided Ahmet with an alternate means of qualifying himself as a worthy actor – something that, as we saw in the previous chapter, was seldom possible in terms of the *market* order. From this standpoint, driving for Uber came to be qualified as the ‘optimal’ primary project – one that maximises *activity* across a portfolio of ‘everyday’ projects from which connexionist worth can be derived.

Yet the range of projects that can become a resource of worth in this manner is not limited to the routine temporality of everyday life, as was seen in this section. It also encompasses longer projects that often markedly differ from one another, and which together shape one’s life-course. Let us call them ‘life projects’. We have already seen one example of this type: Asim’s transition

from a full-time chef at the takeaway to a full-time Uber driver. The next section delves further into how the life stories of some PHV (Uber) participants seemed to affirm this feature of the *connexionist* world.

### ***Life as a Series of Projects***

Taxicab drivers are often known for having an extensive collection of life stories with which to entertain their customers. Speaking of Chicago cabbies, Fred Davis alluded to this as follows:

“It is probably not a mistaken everyday generalization that big-city cabdrivers, on their part, feel less compunction about discussing their own private lives, asking probing questions, and "sounding off" on a great many topics and issues than do others who regularly meet the public, but less fleetingly.”

– Davis (1959, p. 160)

This willingness to breach the public-private divide, together with a certain ‘work-adapted, bitter-sweet admixture of cynicism and sentimentality’<sup>90</sup> (Davis, 1959, p. 160; Hughes, 1958, pp. 23-41), could be said to have significantly facilitated my ethnographic fieldwork. Examples abound, but one that stands out in the context of the present discussion of the *connexionist* order is my one-time engagement with Newcastle PHV (Uber) driver Ahmet, part of which I recalled in the previous section. I found Ahmet a little reserved at the beginning of this engagement, but a few minutes in, we seemed to have established enough rapport for him to delve into the details of his fascinating life story as a migrant from Iran. He narrated to me that six years prior, he was employed as a mechanical engineer in Iran, earning a good salary and leading what he described as a ‘decent, middle-class’ life. However, upon moving to Britain to be with his British-Iranian fiancée, he found that his engineering qualifications were no longer recognised, rendering him –

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<sup>90</sup> This trait of sentimentality may be related, in turn, to the fact that taxicab drivers are *mobile* beings. Scholars in human geography have previously connected embodied movement, including automobility, with an acceleration of affective flows (see Thrift, 2004).

in effect – an unskilled worker. If he wanted to continue his career as an engineer, he would have to gain a British-accredited qualification. He did not have the means to do this right away. So he formulated a ‘life project’ that would last for five years, the duration of his spouse visa: take up whatever work was available and gradually save up for a one-year postgraduate course from The University of Sunderland, all the while sharing household costs with his wife, who is employed as a nurse in the NHS. Upon obtaining his indefinite leave to remain [ILR], he would leave work to continue onto the next project: studying full-time to gain an engineering qualification. This, in turn, was expected to open up a further project, which was the goal he’d set himself: working as a mechanical engineer in the UK.

When I met him in April 2023, Ahmet was almost done with the first project; he had just ten months to go before qualifying for his ILR application. Over the past four years, he had worked as a waiter at a restaurant for almost three years, and since then had been a full-time PHV (Uber) driver. These jobs may be considered temporary ‘everyday projects’ that *fit into* the broader ‘life project’ that was still underway: saving up for a degree whilst on a spouse visa. Both were deemed to have a similar potential for acquiring *market* worth; in Ahmet’s own terms, while driving for Uber had enabled him to ‘save a little more’, there was ‘not too much of a difference’ overall. However, from the standpoint of the *connexionist* order of worth, driving for Uber was judged to be a more ‘perfect’ fit, because *for the duration that it lasts*, the *flexibility* it offers allows him to derive a higher amount of self-worth from another ‘everyday project’ – his family. Of essence here is the drawing of a link between two concurrent features of the *connexionist* world: the virtue of *flexibility* on one end, and what may be referred to as the *projective structuration of life trajectories* on the other (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005). It tells us that Asim’s attribution of worth to the work activity of Uber driving based on the *flexibility* it offers did not just have to do with the ‘everyday project’ of his family, as noted in the previous section, but equally with how well it fit into a life-plan, structured as a series of projects. Hence his qualified judgement: ‘So I’m

happy, even though it's cheap'. Such a viewpoint affirms a teleological orientation that is consistent with the connexionist world, wherein the 'prospect of an *inevitable, desirable endpoint*' (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005, p. 110; emphasis added) can provide an impetus for engagement in the current project, recasting evaluations tied to a different order of worth. For Ahmet, this desirable endpoint was the looming transition into the next 'life project', for which he was already excited: studying for his engineering degree.

The story of Ahmet showcases a personal variation of the *projective structuration of life trajectories*, wherein driving for Uber was only a stop along the way. It is helpful to place it in contrast with another, very different variation which can be gleaned from the story of Pakistani PHV (Uber) participant Zubair. Like Ahmet, Zubair was also a first-generation migrant, hailing from the industrial city of Faisalabad in the Punjab province of Pakistan. Meeting him was a particularly jolly moment in my fieldwork: he was the first fluent Punjabi speaker I'd recruited, and we spent the first ten minutes of the ride-along just joking about how Faisalabadis – residents of his hometown – are famously known for being adept at a peculiar form of sarcastic humour known in the Punjab as *jugat-bāzī*<sup>91</sup>. Rapport was quickly established, and looking back, it is obvious that this was owed in large measure to the entirety of the conversation taking place in the Punjabi language. Eventually, the infectious laughter subsided, and I began to ask him about how he had come to be a PHV (Uber) driver here in the UK. He narrated that he moved to Newcastle with his wife and two daughters in 2018, after working as a manager at a textile mill in Faisalabad for almost seven years. The opportunity to move had presented itself through his kinship *network*: one of his second cousins already lived in the UK, working as a PHV driver, and had repeatedly

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<sup>91</sup> I must admit that I had tremendous difficulty translating the meaning of this phrase to English, although this could be said to affirm what may be its most salient quality: elusiveness. The best I can do is quote a translation done long ago by John T. Platts in *A Dictionary of Urdu, Classical Hindi and English*, in which he describes a *jugat-bāz* [a person who engages in *jugat-bāzī*] as 'one who is *addicted to using language with a double meaning*; a quibbler; a punster' (1884, p. 384; emphasis added). I will add to this an example that me and Zubair laughed together to: taunting someone in jest by saying they have a *piyala wargha munh* ['face like a bowl'].

suggested that he, too, ought to do the same. The idea appealed to Zubair, and eventually he was convinced. Plans were set in motion; it took him a couple of years to save up enough money and set his affairs in order for the move. Once he and his family arrived in the UK, they were greeted by the generosity of his cousin's family, who did all they could to help the new arrivals find their feet. We can already spot the first source of *connexionist* worth at play: Zubair's ability to fully utilise the geographically remote link with his second cousin in the initiation of a new project. This turned it into a high-status link, given that '[the] status of a connection depends upon the extent to which it has established a *mediation* that makes it possible to abolish distance...[ ]...This distance, the crossing or gradual reduction of which defines the quality of the links created, can be referred to...*in temporal terms*, when old, dormant connections are reactivated. It can be alluded to *in spatial terms*, whenever there is co-ordination in real time with others who are spatially distant' (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005, p. 116). Four months later, he was renting his own place, his daughters had resumed school, and he had obtained his PHV license from Newcastle City Council. Since then, he had been working solely on the Uber app.

Zubair's story as a first-generation migrant illustrates a variation of the *projective structuration of life trajectories* wherein driving for Uber in the UK figured as a terminal project: one that he worked to materialise whilst being enrolled in a previous project [his job as a factory manager], and which – at least for now – was expected to last for a considerable period of time. The transition to this very different project was justified in terms of the composite notion of 'quality of life', which for Zubair meant better education and work opportunities for his daughters; access to a form of work that was more *flexible* than his previous job; and the ability to remit high-value currency to his elderly parents in Pakistan. The first aspect involves a *connexionist* qualification insofar as taking up the work activity of Uber driving in the UK enables Zubair to provide his daughters with a better future, thereby allowing for an attribution of worth to himself in his role as a father. The second aspect – that of *flexibility* – supports the prior qualification by

maximising *activity* in the project of the family, just like it did for Ahmet. And the third<sup>92</sup> raises his status as a ‘good son’, which makes for yet another source of *connexionist* worth. All three qualifications form part of a *market-connexionist* compromise that shapes the overall evaluation of his work activity as a PHV (Uber) driver, and drives engagement in the life project it constitutes despite the difficulties it routinely presents in terms of qualifying as a worthy *market* actor. The last one, relating to remittances, also interestingly implies an alternative codification of market worth: in terms of PKR rather than GBP, thereby raising its value.

Differences in the sequence of life projects aside, the two stories we have examined in this section both embody the ideal of the ‘great man’ in the *connexionist* world: one who ventures beyond ‘stability, rootedness, attachment to the local, the security of longstanding links’ (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005, p. 123). *Mobility*, defined as ‘the ability to move around autonomously not only in geographical space, but also between people, or in mental space, between ideas’ (p. 361), is thus a key marker of high status in this world. Conversely, immobility or *rigidity* denotes unworthiness. While Ahmet and Zubair did not directly speak to this quality of being a migrant or a *nomad* in our conversations, the *connexionist* qualifications they did undertake would not have been possible without it. It was by moving to another country and pursuing very different life projects that these PHV (Uber) drivers were able to tap into resources of *connexionist* worth that were not available to others, for instance the securing of what was expected to be a markedly better future for one’s children. This enhanced ability to qualify themselves as *connexionist* actors fortifies the *market-connexionist* compromise in terms of which their work activity is evaluated, and which, to a considerable extent, shields their view of themselves from being irreparably tarnished by their inability to reliably qualify as *market* actors.

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<sup>92</sup> During our conversation, Zubair also shared that he had recently visited Faisalabad for a few weeks, noting – with evident contentment – that he ‘took gifts for everybody’. This indicated that he continued to maintain, to *invest in*, the formerly-proximate, now-remote connections with his family in Pakistan.

Does this mean that being a first-generation migrant<sup>93</sup> makes an Uber driver more amenable to enduring failures of qualification in terms of the *market* order of worth? We cannot say for sure, but the two stories above suggest that depending on the portfolio of projects they have transitioned to in the UK, it could very well be the case. But this must not be taken to mean that the connexionist order of worth will *always* provide them with a means of qualification; we will shortly come across instances of PHV (Uber) drivers, including first-generation migrants, mounting critiques of Uber's commissions and ratings system in terms of ideals tied to the *same* order, which complicates their relationship with it.

### ***Personal Relations, and Tolerance***

Thus far in this chapter, we have examined how PHV (Uber) participants drew on a number of *connexionist* virtues in a *positive* evaluation of their work activity, including but not limited to: the maxim of *activity*; *mediation*; *flexibility*; and albeit more implicitly, *mobility*. We have also observed three possible ways in which this work activity allows for the model test of the connexionist order – transitioning from one *project* to another – to be successfully met: in terms of individual Uber trips, seen as mini-projects; in terms of switching over from one 'everyday project' to another [e.g., driving for Uber, to one's family]; and in terms of more durable 'life projects'. Notably, all the connexionist qualifications seen so far were almost always bound up in a *market-connexionist* compromise, where they either compensated for a deficiency of *market* worth, or where there was a positive *market* evaluation [e.g., based on *demand*], buttressed it, including its ability to withstand critiques from the standpoint of the *industrial* order. This reaffirms the point developed over the previous chapter that *market* logics play a dominant, organising role in the work activity of PHV (Uber) drivers. In the 'taxi world' of Uber driving, it is qualifying as a *market* actor that seems most appropriate, valuable, and deserving of relentless

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<sup>93</sup> Whilst there is no specific data on the proportion of PHV (Uber) drivers from a migrant background, we do know that a large proportion – as high as 94% in London – comes from ethnic minority communities (Coleman, 2019), which tend to have higher levels of immigration.



pursuit; it is, put simply, the ‘aim of the game’. The work relations inhabited by PHV (Uber) drivers – including but not limited to the indexing of fares offered to *demand* and *supply*, the *opportunism* stoked by surge pricing, or the associated need to pay *attention to others* on a continual basis – reinforce such a normative orientation.

Yet at the same time, the chances of attaining a market qualification are remote, and if the empirical data examined in the previous chapter are any indication, receding even further with time. In the course of ethnographic fieldwork, it was always in variations of this scenario – when the precarity of a market qualification was either in plain sight [e.g., the unprofitability of ‘normal’ fares], or felt to be vulnerable [e.g., the receding chances of a surge] – that PHV participants took recourse to virtues from the connexionist order. A *market-connexionist* compromise<sup>94</sup> was set up in this manner, in terms of which it was often possible to reach a positive evaluation, both of their work activity and of themselves. That the connexionist order was invoked in this manner is illustrative of the ‘moral complexity’ of these actors on one end (Thévenot, 2002), and the increasing presence of this order in everyday tests and trials on the other. Qualifying as a *partner* in a cutting edge, technologically advanced form of *mediation*; a *flexible being*; an *active* family member – all these were ‘lifelines’ that made up for the lack of qualification as a worthy *market* player, something that these participants were confronted with on an almost-everyday basis.

These ‘lifelines’ allowed them to *go beyond* the realm of market relations in evaluating their work activity, and by implication their own selves. And as we have seen over the past three sections, they were tapped into in different ways, depending on the issues at stake at specific points of our conversation and the order of worth being referred to. But what they had in common was their instigation of a *reversal* of the situation, either from the *market* to *connexionist* order,

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<sup>94</sup> The exact form taken by this compromise varied with the specific circumstances of each participant. This is to be expected as a totalizing, universal form of equivalence is out of the question in the *connexionist* world; it can only be achieved in *projects* that are carried out on a *local* scale (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005, p.113).

or from the *industrial* to *connexionist* order. The *market* to *connexionist* reversal was seen in two variations of the *market-connexionist* compromise noted above. The first was where a partial market qualification of PHV participants' involvement in Uber driving *had* been reached in terms of one virtue [*demand*], yet was felt to be under threat in terms of another [*opportunism; selfishness*]<sup>95</sup>; a connexionist qualification was then brought in to fortify it. The second was where a market qualification was being throttled, due for instance to the value of 'normal' Uber fares, which meant that they could not substantiate – with adequate supports from reality (Goffman, 1952) – a positive evaluation of their work activity and of themselves; here, a connexionist qualification served as a 'lifeline' with which they could redeem their self-worth. Equally invaluable, however, was the second kind of reversal, where connexionist qualifications were brought in to quell critiques of market logics tied to Uber from the *industrial* order of worth. This kind of reversal [*industrial* to *connexionist*] deserves further attention as it denotes participants undertaking a critical operation that has been performed by Uber *itself* in the past. In view of this, the remainder of this section traces some continuities between two instances of such a reversal in participants' accounts and the manner in which Uber itself has operated, and justified its actions, in terms resonant with the connexionist order.

The first such instance can be traced in an extract discussed earlier in the first section: Asim's reversal of a situation set up by the presentation of a critique from the *industrial* order [Uber is driving a weakening of *control* over the supply side; isn't that bad for everybody?], to one where the ultimate good was *mediation* ['ride-hailing apps are the future...embrace it']. A second instance, relating to a different, heretofore unexamined virtue in the connexionist world – that of *personability* – appeared in one of the written responses given by South East hackney carriage participant Tom, who I earlier characterised as a 'deviant' case. The response in question was an

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<sup>95</sup> Whilst this succession of evaluation was encountered in many variations, an exact case of it can be traced in accounts given by PHV (Uber) participant Asim.

answer given by Tom in a follow-up, back-and-forth conversation on Twitter direct messages where I first asked him: ‘What do you think about Uber’s business model?’ He replied: ‘I think their business model is excellent, and the way they do their business helps drivers and passengers’. I then probed him on what he would say to those in the taxicab trade who criticise the company for how it first penetrated the UK market, noting in particular the skirting of rules and regulations in the early years of its operation, and the impression in media reporting that it was being allowed to do this by the upper echelons of government. His response, given below, politely dismissed all such criticisms:

“The way they entered the market wasn't ideal, *but they are permitted to lobby elected officials, anyone is*, and no model is fool proof, it can always be exploited, but they have great protective measures.”

– Tom, South East hackney carriage driver, written response, 3 May 2023

Tom’s concise response encapsulates an unveiling operation that is the converse of those examined in the chapter on the *industrial* world, which concerned the same subject. Whereas those critiques were aimed at the presence of foreign beings and objects [e.g., actors in the central government] that were contaminating an *industrial* ordering of taxicab relations, Tom’s unveiling – although clearly cognisant of industrial logics [‘The way they entered the market *wasn’t ideal...*’] – sought to ‘overturn’ the situation entirely by reversing it into a *connexionist* ordering of worth, in order to disqualify the very content of those critiques (Boltanski and Thévenot, 2006, p. 218). By contending that Uber is ‘permitted to lobby elected officials, *anyone is*’, he invoked the virtue of *personability* in the connexionist world, wherein it is not only appropriate, but desirable, to place value upon personal, face-to-face relations in the conduct of business, just as in other spheres of life (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005, p. 118). In so doing he conferred a degree of legitimacy to the otherwise-controversial manner in which the company had acted in the early

years of its operation in the UK. So whereas Asim undertook a reversal by mobilising the virtue of *mediation* in the connexionist order, Tom did the same by way of the virtue of *personability*.

Let us now briefly zoom into how these reversals connect with Uber's actions in two specific events when it had found itself embroiled in controversy, one of which also involved the company giving public statements in which connexionist justifications can be discerned. The first of these events goes back to 2015, when the company was faced with then-Mayor of London Boris Johnson proposing a spate of regulations to more closely regulate its sprawling operation in the capital. These proposals included, for instance, a 5-minute wait time between a booking request being sent by a rider and an Uber driver being able to fulfil it, which was meant to address accusations of 'e-hailing' and bring Uber a little closer to the way in which traditional, local private hire operators had operated within the 'two-tier' regulatory landscape. Somewhat surprisingly, however, the mayor dropped most of these proposals in January 2016, insisting that 'we can't turn our back on technological progress'.

Subsequent revelations by the *Daily Mail* throw some light on the events that transpired in the timespan between these two developments, with the most notable one concerning Rachel Whetstone, godmother to former Prime Minister David Cameron's late son, Ivan. Whetstone joined Uber as an executive in early 2015, and it is known that she hosted an 'intimate' Christmas party in December 2015 that was attended by both Cameron and the former Chancellor of the Exchequer George Osborne, together with their wives (Adams, 2017). This personal gathering, together with other official, undisclosed meetings involving No 10 digital advisor Daniel Korski, a number of cabinet ministers and Uber executives in the same period (Mason et al., 2022), point toward clandestine efforts set into motion by actors in the central government towards swaying the Mayor of London's approach to regulating Uber. In relation to Tom's statement earlier, they reveal the operationalisation of a specific kind of value attached to *personal relations* in the connexionist world, whereby 'lobbying replaces advertising campaigns' (Boltanski and Chiapello,

2005, p. 132). Yet there was also another, closely related connexionist virtue at play: *tolerance*. This virtue denotes the ability of *networks*, like that of the Uber platform, to develop as they may, without regard to the constraints of any ‘official’, bureaucratic, or state forms of power. In the controversy recounted above [as well as the one coming up below], Uber did not find it absolutely necessary to comply with ‘state rules regulating the use of goods and the management of human beings’ in its actions, because in the moral universe it situates itself in, ‘both *relations* and the *rules of the game...are invented as one goes along*’ (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005, pp. 118-124; emphasis added). The adept use of *personal relations* with officials in the central government formed part of this mobilisation of *tolerance*, and further illustrates the company’s moral alignment with the connexionist world.

The second event goes back to 2019, when Uber’s private hire operator license was suspended for a second time by London’s regulator TfL. This suspension was imposed after it was discovered that over a span of just a few months, more than 14,000 Uber trips were taken with unlicensed drivers who had fraudulently uploaded their photos onto accounts of real, licensed drivers. Each of these 14,000 trips constituted a criminal offense, and had also violated what is perhaps the core element of the UK’s overall regulatory framework for taxicabs: that drivers be *licensed* by local authorities. Yet responses by the company’s then regional general manager, Jamie Heywood, and CEO, Dara Khosrowshahi, to this grave violation openly defied TfL’s decision, with the latter calling it ‘extraordinary and wrong’, and ‘just wrong’, respectively (Topham, 2019). Heywood’s response is particularly interesting as he based his strong critical judgement on the sheer numbers of riders and drivers who would no longer be able to use Uber’s services: ‘3.5 million riders and 45,000 licensed drivers who *depend on Uber* in London’ (ibid.; emphasis added). Viewed from the standpoint of the connexionist world, these people were being denied their right to enrol into connections mediated by the Uber platform, and it is the reiteration of this right that gave an affective potency to Uber’s response to the suspension. In other words,

it did not matter that longstanding regulations were being defied – the ability to mediate, and make connections, was *more sacrosanct* and therefore must not be impeded<sup>96</sup>. Although the virtue of *mediation* took centre stage in Uber’s statements in this manner, they could also be seen – on a more implicit level – as counter-critiques premised on the virtue of *tolerance*: let this modern, cutting edge tool of *mediation* find its place, despite the flouting of regulations. The invocation of both virtues can be traced in a similar manner in the reversal undertaken by Asim, where he disqualified the desirability of the industrial mechanism of *control* [over the supply side] by way of the connexionist virtue of *mediation*. Like Uber, he, too thought that regulations were not the ‘be-all and end-all’ of the world – that there ought to be *tolerance* for the rise of a modern, cutting edge tool of *mediation*, as well as the expansion in numbers of the ‘partner-drivers’ enrolled into it.

The continuities traced above between Asim and Tom’s accounts on one end, and Uber’s actions and justifications on the other, demonstrate that both Uber and its ‘partner-drivers’ can recognise, and call on, virtues from the connexionist world. For both these participants, connexionist virtues provided an invaluable resource not just for evaluating their work activity in terms other than those from the *market* world, but also for defending the company with which that activity was associated. It should be recalled, however, that these two participants were ‘deviant’ cases; no other PHV (Uber) participant echoed their defences of Uber. Nonetheless, that their justifications sometimes approximated those of Uber itself raises an important question: can these drivers and Uber be considered connexionist actors on an equal footing? For instance, are both able to derive worth from *personability* to a similar extent, or are there discrepancies? If so, why? The next two sections, concerned with participants’ judgements on the role of two key

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<sup>96</sup> This was not the first instance of this justification being mobilised by the company: at the time of its first suspension in 2017, it had directly publicised a petition which was eventually signed by over 600,000 London residents who were Uber users, and were critical of TfL’s decision (Doward, 2017).

connexionist mechanisms that, in tandem with the *market* order, shape the more immediate realm of their *work relations*, will attempt to address this pivotal question.

### ***Predictive and Reputational Justice: The Ratings System***

#### **(i) Codifying Personability: Uber Ratings as a Connexionist Standard**

What exactly is the role of *personability*, as enacted in face-to-face interactions, in the day-to-day life of an Uber driver? It is helpful to dissect this by going back to the role of ‘intellectual play’ in taxicab driving, as drawn out by Fred Davis (1959) in relation to the ‘vagaries of tipping’ faced by Chicago cabbies. Davis argued that cabbies’ lack of control over how much a given passenger would tip was generative of ‘diverse tactics and stratagems (some more premeditated than others)’ on their part, but that these ultimately failed to ‘further calculability of the tip’, thus keeping the ‘intellectual play’ of devising them alive (pp. 163-64). In the previous chapter, I posited that the uncertainty inherent in the highly sought-after yet ‘liminal’ event of surge, wherein PHV (Uber) participants were able to qualify themselves as worthy *market* actors, could similarly be seen as a source of intellectual play – one whose receding presence was acutely felt<sup>97</sup>.

Yet while the frame of intellectual play allows us to draw a parallel between tipping in US taxi driving and chasing a surge on Uber in this manner, it can also be harnessed to bring forth important divergences in how the dimension of personability figures in the two contexts. Although Davis did not address this dimension directly, it formed an integral component of the common strategies<sup>98</sup> for maximising the chances of a tip that he attributed to Chicago cabbies, which were

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<sup>97</sup> Of course, normal Uber fares are also unpredictable in character. However, since they seldom hold out the promise of *profitability*, they are unable to elicit the same excitability and engagement that is seen in the case of a surge.

<sup>98</sup> I am referring in particular to two of the four strategies that he outlined: ‘the hard-luck story’ [described above], and ‘the “psychological” approach’. The name of the latter came from a conversation he had had with a cabbie, who elaborated on it as follows: “In this business you’ve got to use psychology. You’ve got to make the ride fit the person. Now, take a businessman. He’s in a hurry to get someplace and he doesn’t want a, lot of bullshit and crapping around...[ ]... With old people, it’s just the opposite. Take it easy with them. Creep along, open doors for them, help them in and out, *be real folksy*. Call them ‘Sir’ and ‘Ma’am’ and they’ll soon be calling you ‘young man.’ They’re suckers for this stuff, and they’ll *loosen up their pocketbooks a little bit*.” (Davis, 1959, p. 164; emphasis added).

matched to certain personalities appearing in a heuristic typology of passengers [e.g., the businessman, the lady shopper, the non-cab user or ‘yokel’]. The art of personability, or plainly speaking ‘being nice’, was key to the effective deployment of these strategies. Unlike the chances of a tip, which always remained elusive, cabbies had autonomy over how and when to make use of personability in interacting with their passengers. For instance, Davis (1959) pointed to the way in which some cabbies would share accounts of past trials and tribulations with young, supposedly gullible passengers, elicit some empathy, and then warmly affirm that quality in them, thus making them ‘feel good’. Conversely, they could choose to completely ignore the ‘yokels’<sup>99</sup>, who were seen as not worth the effort (p. 163). The contrast between these two situations makes clear that the use of personability was a strategic undertaking on their part – one that was *instrumental* insofar as it was oriented towards a clear goal: extracting a higher monetary return [i.e., *market worth*] in the form of a tip. Sometimes it succeeded, other times it failed. Yet the intellectual play stoked by rearticulating it from one moment to the next, by putting it to the test, endowed a certain sense of fulfilment to the everyday rhythms of their work activity. Differences in tipping culture between the UK and US notwithstanding, these insights about Chicago cabbies may, to some extent, be transposed to hackney carriage drivers in the UK, who exercise autonomy over personal, face-to-face interactions in a similar manner.

Keeping these observations in mind, let us now return to the context of Uber driving. Unlike Chicago cabbies [and also hackney carriage drivers], for whom ‘being nice’ towards passengers is a strategic tactic to be opportunistically deployed, Uber drivers are enrolled into a configuration of work relations wherein this quality is continually codified as a baseline criterion, an *absolute minimum* that must be adhered to. By ‘codification’, I am referring to an attempt<sup>100</sup>

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<sup>99</sup> While the term is colloquial to the US, one could transpose this characterisation to the hackney carriage trade in the UK: anyone who enters a London black cab and then tells the driver their destination postcode unprompted, instead of the street or actual venue, would immediately be marked out as a ‘yokel’.

<sup>100</sup> The attempt is always incomplete, and is understood here in terms of Deleuze and Guattari’s (1988) theorisation of the inseparability of ‘deterritorialization’ and ‘reterritorialization’.



to standardise the nature of sociality that is enacted in the time-space of the Uber trip by rendering it into discrete, quantifiable variables (Thévenot, 1984; Marres and Stark, 2020; Stark and Pais, 2020). This codification is achieved through Uber's algorithmic mechanism of the ratings system, whose role in managing the behaviour of 'partner-drivers' provides perhaps the best illustration of the how the *connexionist* order also shapes the socio-material work environment they inhabit.

Following previous iterations of worker surveillance in business organisations (Beniger, 1989; Zureik, 2003; Saval, 2014), the ratings system is oriented towards producing 'a homogenous Uber experience for riders' (Rosenblat and Stark, 2016, p. 3772; Bruder, 2015), with the responsibility of providing this experience placed on the driver, and the responsibility of evaluating it on the rider, who effectively assumes the role of a 'middle manager' or 'surveillor' (Stark and Levy, 2015; Rosenblat, 2018; Gandini, 2019). After every individual Uber trip, the interface of the Uber app prompts the rider to rate their experience with the driver on a scale of one to five stars. Most often given through a single, quick tap on their screen, this rating becomes part of a running database of ratings from the driver's 500 most recent trips, based on which their average rating – attached to their profile – is calculated. This rating is concurrently translated into a ranking relative to other Uber drivers, and *must* remain above a certain threshold – usually as high as 4.5 stars – or the driver will be made subject to a series of sanctions: warnings accompanied by 'tips' to raise their rating (see Rosenblat, 2018, p. 151), then one or more temporary suspensions, and then an outright, permanent ban from working on the platform – something that PHV (Uber) participant Ajay likened to a 'sword hanging over' one's head.

It is crucial to remember here that the rider's rating of their 'experience' is based, in essence, on the perceived quality of their face-to-face interaction with the driver. An evaluation of this interaction might encompass a number of considerations, like the manner in which the cab was driven, but what takes centre stage is the driver's *personability*: whether in the form of having an interesting conversation with the rider, putting on music they like on the stereo, not speaking

loudly on a call, or, alternatively, recognising their preference that they are not to be spoken to at all. Compared to the case of Chicago cabbies, the codification of this evaluation via the ratings system means, in very simple terms, that the cabbie no longer has autonomy over the art of ‘being nice’, and is left with no choice but to be nice at all times, regardless of who is encountered or what the monetary return from it might be; indeed, as will be seen towards the end of this section, in the vast majority of occasions there is no such return. Rosenblat (2018, p. 95) has previously argued that the ratings system is one of several information asymmetries that gravely complicate Uber’s characterisation of its ‘partner-drivers’ as independent-contractors, which is enshrined in their classification under labour law in the vast majority of countries it operates in. Conversely, Uber itself has presented the system as a ‘two-way’ mechanism that ensures ‘accountability’ and incentivises both ‘high quality service’ and ‘*courteous conduct*’ (Uber, 2015, p. 5, cited in Chan, 2019; emphasis added).

It is true that the system is ‘two-way’ in that drivers also rate their riders; however, the potential ramifications of the two ratings greatly differ<sup>101</sup>. What is more revealing in the context of the present discussion is Uber’s designation of ‘*courteous conduct*’ as an objective of the ratings system. This objective is underpinned by a justificatory logic drawn from the connexionist order of worth, wherein the quality of *personability* constitutes a virtue based on which worth can be legitimately accorded. By putting the ratings system in place, Uber is operationalising a ‘mechanism of justice’ (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005, p. 126) that sets up a recurring test *in terms of* this virtue – one that ensures that it is upheld to a certain standard that is technically codified into the algorithm. Each Uber trip thus becomes a test of whether or not the Uber driver

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<sup>101</sup> Albeit drivers can and do sometimes discriminate between riders on the basis of their rating (see Rose, 2018), there are rarely any sanctions for a low-rated rider continuing to request bookings on the app. One notable exception to this was Uber’s suspension of rider accounts with low ratings [below 4 stars] in Australia and New Zealand in 2018 (*BBC News*, 2018). Despite announcements that this policy will be extended to other regions (Uber, 2019b), this has not been found to be the case. In a Facebook group for Uber drivers in the UK that I followed on PHV participant David’s recommendation, there are periodic posts where drivers share screenshots of a rider with a rating below 3.5 stars [and sometimes below 3] requesting a ride.

matches up to the conception of a worthy connexionist actor implied by that standard: one who is *personable*, or adept at managing face-to-face interactions, as this is a vital prerequisite of their ability to satisfactorily advance *mediation* in the wider network they are enrolled in.

The standard in question is the minimum threshold of an average rating [usually 4.5 stars or above], and can be understood as such only from the vantage point of connexionist relations. Consider, for instance, the following critique of Uber by hackney participant Alec, the head of a London black cab drivers' organisation: 'They [Uber] want *no standards*. Back then [2017, when Uber first lost its license in London] they were putting pressure on TfL on the requirement for a DBS check. "No, no, no! That's going to take a long time. *What you should do is leave it to the ratings* – if there's a 1 star rating or something then action can be taken after the fact". So, wait until it happens, rape a female passenger. What an absolute joke! There could be a monkey driving an Uber car'. This critique was, quite expectedly, mounted from the standpoint from the *industrial* order of worth, where standards pertain to tests of *functional efficiency* [of which not having a criminal record is part]. However, if one undertakes a 'reversal' and assumes the standpoint of the *connexionist* order, then it is indeed possible to rebut Alec's statement by asserting that the rating is the standard: one that modulates the driver's behaviour through a recurring test of *personability* that, when consistently met, should preclude any untoward event from taking place<sup>102</sup>.

This test of *personability* proceeds by weighing evidence in the form of ordinal ratings, which serve as indicators that are simultaneously *predictive* and *reputational*. They are *predictive* in the sense they enable Uber's algorithms to continuously rank an Uber driver relative to other drivers (Stark and Pais, 2020, p. 57), send automated warnings if they slip below the required

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<sup>102</sup> This reversal formed part of long-term PHV participant David's view, shared on multiple occasions, that he would much rather have his young daughter travel through Uber rather than in a hackney carriage vehicle, as the app's features would let him see the rating of her driver, their details, and her live location during the trip – all of which amounted to greater safety in his assessment.

minimum threshold of around 4.5 stars, and, in the event that a series of low ratings have been received in quick succession, promptly suspend or deactivate their account. And they are *reputational* in the sense that they are attached to a driver's [and rider's] profile as a proxy measure of their ability to satisfactorily partake in face-to-face interaction [i.e., their *personability*] – one that lends a certain amount of trust before, and during, the ride. Both these features are consistent with the design of 'mechanisms of justice' in the connexionist world (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005, pp. 125-26). The entry of such mechanisms in the occupational space of taxicab driving demonstrates, once again, the rising normativity of connexionist logics in everyday life, which has 'propelled a rationalization of the [digitally mediated] social stratification process, and equipped it with a new kind of moral justification...[ ]...no one wants an uncurated news feed or an unrated cab driver anymore' (Fourcade and Healy, 2024, p. 284; emphasis added). As a result, it has become conceivable to regard as reasonable that an Uber driver who consistently receives a low rating may be *cut off* from the network of the platform, since they have repeatedly failed to uphold the virtue of *personability* in a satisfactory manner. If we revert back to the view postulated earlier that every Uber trip constitutes a 'mini-project' in itself, then the terminal sanction of deactivation thwarts a transition from one such project to the next, thereby signalling that the driver in question has – after failing the test of *personability* several times – now failed the model test of the connexionist world. Given the moral universe Uber situates itself in, they must, then, be cast out of the network.

## (ii) Disparity in Power Vis-à-vis the Rider

I now proceed to relating my conceptualisation of the ratings system as a *connexionist* 'mechanism of justice', as outlined above, with PHV (Uber) participants' accounts of their encounters with this system. Like any other 'equipped', morally complex being (Thévenot, 2002), a recognition of the connexionist logic of *personability* underlying this system was present in these participants themselves. One succinct example of this can be found in a remark by veteran PHV driver Martin, where he drew a link between this system and a broader shift in how service

workers are remunerated: ‘I used to work in retail, and back then I remember our bonus structure got tied to *how you sold it* compared to *how much you sold*’.

Did this recognition also mean that these participants *embraced* the logic underlying the ratings system, in the sense that they actively sought to qualify themselves in line with it? The answers to this question were not what we would expect, and diverged significantly from those found in previous research on Uber drivers. They will be brought forth in relation to the three accounts given below:

Salman: “What importance do you give to the ratings you receive from riders?”

Ahmet: “I’m not particularly bothered about them. But I have a friend who got banned from Uber, he got a few 1 star ratings that pushed him below the minimum. Later on he told me it might have been due to talking loudly on the phone, and when a customer argued with him over the drop-off location. Uber sent him warnings, but I guess he wasn’t taking them seriously. But then [after his suspension] he wasn’t allowed back. Nowadays he is with Blueline, but he was happy with Uber.”

Salman: “Why?”

Ahmet: “Because with Uber it’s easier to get paid, you don’t have to deal with anyone. And it’s more flexible too.”

Salman: “How do you manage the risk of something like that happening to you?”

Ahmet: “I just know that in case of any problems with customers, you have to message Uber Support straight away. *So you don’t get banned*. Having a dashcam helps too, so if anyone reports me, I can message Uber that I’ll send you the recording. I heard they sometimes back off in that case.”

– Interview exchange, ride-along, 22 April 2023

“Sometimes customers give you a bad rating for no reason, but Uber will not let you challenge it. I had a couple of instances where it was clear they [Uber] just don’t care about the drivers...[ ]...I got

a trip from Durham to Newcastle, then got one back towards Chester Le Street. I picked up a woman who was having an altercation with her boyfriend. I had to prevent him from getting in the car, and then [during the trip] she was crying all the way, so every 5 minutes or so I talked to her and tried to console her. This is 2-3am at night [on the weekend]. On Monday morning, I wake up to the allegation that I'd been staring at her from the rear view mirror, harassing her. At first I didn't know who made the allegation as I sometimes do 40, 50 trips a day. With that many people, you have to be careful. There have been cases of cab drivers being stabbed from behind. Once in Liverpool, there was a terrorist attack where the driver had looked back, spotted a bomb, and then jumped out of the vehicle in time. So checking your back is necessary. But still you get these stupid allegations. *Now I'm an almost 5 star driver*, but they [Uber] stopped me from working for almost 5 months. And over what!? *Pure racism! People make allegations because you're black.* Any little allegation and Uber doesn't hear the driver's side, they believe the customers. We work for them, they should listen to us...[ ]...I went to the union [ADCU] and they messaged my MP, and there I got the idea to do it myself, so I wrote to my MP and then finally someone [from Uber] got in touch...[ ]...So I think this [ratings] system is not fair, like you have to talk to the customer, offer them some kind of service, and then you get a low rating, and the reason for that comes up as 'conversation' or 'choice of radio station' [\*smiles\*], your overall rating drops, and there is a floor you must meet, like at least 4.5 stars or something...[ ]...When I was suspended, I worked for Blueline. *They are local, so they know how people behave.*"

– Obi, Newcastle PHV (Uber) driver, in-person interview, 27 October 2022

Salman: "Have you ever done anything to try to increase your rating?"

David: "For me, I have never, ever, ever paid any attention whatsoever on trying to get a rating on Uber, right. Likewise with my passengers. You finish a job, you press the thing ['end trip'], and it asks you to rate the passenger. Can't be arsed – 5 stars. Unless you've done something really, really bad, every single person that's getting in my car is going to get 5 stars. And I imagine it's the same on the customer's end, like I've never once tried to do anything on Uber with regard to ratings...[ ] If, like, it was *my* customer [as an own-operator PHV driver] who'd phoned my number, I would

be trying more to, uh, pander to their bullshit, but when it's through Uber I couldn't give a shit! *Uber don't give a shit about me; I don't give a shit about them.* So if a customer gets in the car and gives me an attitude, I'll give them an attitude back...[ ]...I'm trying to pull it up here [\*navigates the Uber app on his phone\*]...I don't remember how to get to it but I'm pretty sure I'm 4.99 or something like that, *without ever trying.* But I would say: certainly the only reason for a driver like myself getting a bad rating would be *because the customer has been unreasonable with me.*"

– Interview exchange, Durham, 6 October 2022

The principal takeaway from the extracts above pertains to an issue that is alluded to in all three accounts: the *disparity in power vis-à-vis the rider*, accentuated in particular by the looming risk of getting suspended or deactivated ['banned']. In the first extract, Ahmet shares his pre-emptive strategy of contacting Uber 'straight away' when a rider leaves a bad rating and/or reports him for something that might, in his estimation, actualise that possibility. He had equipped himself with this strategy after finding out what happened to his friend – who had ignored the ratings and therefore also the test of *personability* tied to them. Whilst he acceded his friend's failings, the sudden nature of their experience had left a lasting reminder of the fact that customers can, indeed, evaluate their Uber driver in such a way as to spur a suspension of their account.

From the standpoint of the connexionist order, the onset of this sanction amounts to being *cut off* from the network of the Uber platform: for the duration that it is in place, a suspended driver cannot enrol into that network, and is therefore denied the ability to access work through it. In contrast to Ahmet, who anticipated and sought to avert this sanction, Obi, a Nigerian PHV (Uber) driver, had first-hand experience of facing it. Although we cannot ascertain the exact circumstances surrounding the interaction Obi refers to in the second extract, we know that he was suspended for 5 months, with minimal and mostly automated communication from Uber Support, and no redressal mechanisms to establish the truth of the matter. When he did get past automated responses, and through to a human customer service representative, they were

seemingly based in a call centre in India, and he found their mechanical responses frustrating<sup>103</sup>. Only becoming aware that he had been suspended upon waking up in the morning, his tale chimes with a comment by another PHV (Uber) participant with experience of an unexpected suspension, Aziz, who described Uber as '*judge, jury, executioner*' in case of any problems with riders<sup>104</sup>. Both these participants' suspensions demonstrate the exact thing that hackney participant Alec was seen to criticise earlier: enforcement action based on a relatively recent, connexionist standard: that of ordinal ratings. Whereas a non-Uber private hire or a hackney carriage driver would have been reported to their licensing authority [i.e., local council], leading to a tribunal where a decision on their fate would have to be taken according to codified procedures of an *industrial-civic* kind, Uber drivers can be reported directly through the app, which in most cases removes their recourse to such tribunals.

Notably, Obi considered some rider reports about him to be borne of racism, emphasising, specifically in the part of our conversation on the ratings system, that 'the issue of racism is key'. What he had gone through had led him to the view that Uber's ratings system allowed riders with racist attitudes free to leave unwarranted, sometimes false reports just because he was black. Some findings relating to the process of racialisation in the context of this study will be addressed in the next, final empirical chapter [*The Interplay between Figurational Positioning and Orders of Worth*]. In relation to the present discussion, it is worthwhile to note that Obi's concern reflects the point underscored earlier by Rosenblat (2018) that the algorithmic mechanism of the ratings system is far from a 'neutral' technology – one akin to 'just an engine that works behind the scenes' (p. 19). Rather, it can 'absorb the biases held by the consumers who rate drivers', whilst also

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<sup>103</sup> This experience, along with his comment that Blueline 'know how people behave', relates to what an Uber driver in the US told Rosenblat about not having a human boss: 'It's better, *except when something goes wrong*' (2018, p. 144; emphasis added).

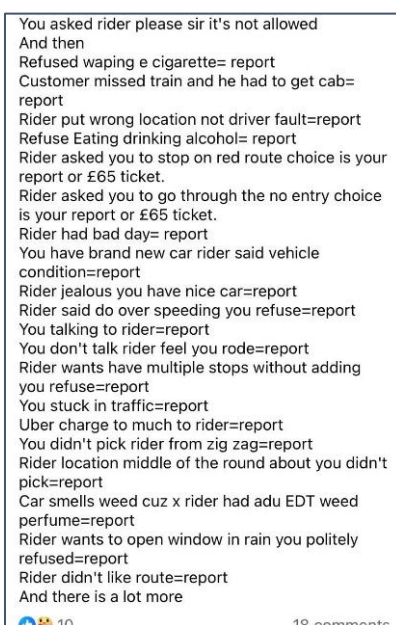
<sup>104</sup> Aziz narrated that he was suspended when, a few days after he had grown a beard, a customer coupled a 1-star rating with a report that he didn't look like his clean-shaven profile picture on the Uber app. He had a frantic two hours in the morning trying to get through to an 'actual person' on Uber Support and sending them a selfie, after which he was promptly reinstated.



making this ‘much harder to detect, prove, or prevent’ (p. 113). Obi recognised that such biases or prejudices can also encompass racism of a veiled kind: something that he, as someone who was black, was more likely to come across. His affective discomfort in relation to this possibility, also exhibited by way of a quavering-yet-angry voice during our conversation, provided a vivid illustration of the extent to which the ratings system is hedged in favour of the rider – so much so that detesting one’s driver for being black, when couched in terms of their ‘choice of radio station’ or ‘[manner of] conversation’, could still end up being a valid, and quite possibly *unimpeachable*, pretext for a low rating [see Figure 21 below for more such pretexts, and the possible scope of their arbitrariness].

This disparity in power vis-à-vis the rider, as *flowing through* the socio-technical relations of Uber driving (Latour, 1986; Law, 1991), is helpfully understood with reference to the perspective of ‘societal coalitions’ in the platform economy, as outlined by Stark and Pais (2020). In their critical assessment of algorithmic management, Stark and Pais contend that algorithmic mechanisms like Uber’s ratings system are sustained through ‘an alliance between firm owners, investors and consumers’ (2020, p. 64), all of whose interests [e.g., excavating valuable data for platforms; profit for investors; convenience and affordability for customers] are *encoded* or designed into these mechanisms. Importantly, they describe these coalitions as operating ‘at the regulatory level’: the close, everyday relationship between platforms and their users, often reinforced by *market attachments* to their apps/products [see previous chapter], leads the former to enlist the latter in advocating changes to existing regulatory policies (Rahman and Thelen, 2019). Such changes include those that are to the clear detriment of platform workers, such as Uber’s past efforts to maintain their classification as independent-contractors in California (Mohamed, 2020). To the three-way relationship identified by Stark and Pais, I would add the

role of the state, whose retreat from a space where clear regulatory infringements<sup>105</sup> have taken place as well as its occasional alignment with platform owners, investors and customers during past controversial events<sup>106</sup> has reinforced the coalitions between them, in turn denying platform workers of a greater stake in how they are algorithmically managed on an everyday basis.



**Figure 21:** Facebook post in a group for Uber drivers in the UK, listing possible reasons a customer might give a poor rating/report the driver (Facebook, 2024b)

The moral force mobilised by the aforementioned coalitions can be located in the rise of the *connexionist* maxims whose moral-pragmatic articulations have been reviewed in this chapter [*mediation; flexibility; tolerance; personability*], and which have become bound up with, and rearticulated, certain *market* maxims [e.g., *competition; choice; affordability*], thereby instituting a uniquely late modern *market-connexionist* normativity that now prevails as ‘commonsense in spite of the law’ (Casas-Cortés, 2022). Albeit not from the pragmatic sociology

<sup>105</sup> The circumstances surrounding Uber’s first suspension by TfL in London, as reviewed in the earlier chapter ‘Shake It Up: The Controversial Rise of Uber’, are a case in point.

<sup>106</sup> Ministers in the UK central government, like former Business Secretary Sajid Javid, have openly aligned themselves with Uber in the past. Others, like former Prime Minister David Cameron and Chancellor of the Exchequer George Osborne, are known to have supported it in private (Adams, 2017).

viewpoint adopted in this project, this point has been raised earlier by del Nido (2021a), whose ethnographic study of Uber's disruptive arrival in Argentina focused on five 'gladitorial truths' [choice/convenience; competition; technological determinism; popular opinion; 'natural forces' of the economy] that were mobilised by the company and its middle-class consumers, the sum of which overlaps greatly with the *market-connexionist* articulation set out above. Specifically in relation to how the test of *personability* set up by the ratings system is also shaped by this articulation, del Nido (2021b) notes that the lingering threat of suspension or deactivation of Uber drivers' accounts based on riders' ratings represents 'the reproduction of an economic logic where [the *market* virtue of] convenience, in the form of the neoclassical consumer bottom line, [organizes] an entire political economy *inherently inimical to the public sphere*' (p. 331; emphasis added). In other words, it doesn't matter if a rider leaves a bad rating after encountering an Uber driver they didn't like just because they were black, because this encounter is subject *only to their evaluation*; any redressal mechanisms of an *industrial-civic* kind, previously figuring in a compromise with *market* logics, have therefore been cast out of the picture. The entrenchment of this *market-connexionist* normativity, then, also endows the rider with more power in the logic of the ratings system.

### (iii) The Nature of Everyday Investment in Personability: Emotion Work and Impression Management

A second key takeaway from the extracts above can be traced in both Ahmet and David's accounts, and pertains to the *extent* to which PHV (Uber) drivers embrace and actively invest in, or alternatively seek to qualify themselves in line with, the *connexionist* ideal of *personability* elicited by the ratings system. Here, the findings of this ethnographic study deviate strikingly from those of previous research, for instance Rosenblat's (2018) observation that for Uber drivers in the US, 'ratings are everything' (p. 152), Chan's (2019) finding that they actively engage themselves in a 'rating game', or, on a broader level, Rahman's (2021) suggestion that opaque third-party evaluation systems implemented by platforms may be experienced by workers as an

‘invisible cage’<sup>107</sup>. Whereas the former two studies underlined something akin to an active investment in the ideal of *personability* underlying the ratings system, the accounts given by Ahmet, Obi and David, together with a number of other PHV (Uber) participants<sup>108</sup>, indicated that they invested in this ideal *only insofar* as that investment would avert the sanction of a suspension or deactivation from taking place; in other words, *out of necessity, not of their own accord*.

The reasons for this were threefold, and did not just have to do with the frustrations resulting from Uber’s unqualified alignment with customers in case of unfair ratings, which David alluded to when he said that any instances of a low rating would likely be ‘because the customer has been unreasonable with me’. It also pertained to the inability of ephemeral encounters with riders to translate into ‘social capital’ (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005, p. 75), which – as we discussed earlier in the theoretical overview [Part III] – is hindered by Uber barring drivers from contacting riders beyond the ride (see *Uber B.V.*, 2015). And, crucially, it was also owed to their negative – and one might say deteriorating – *market* evaluations<sup>109</sup> of the work activity of Uber driving, the converse of which may have supported a compromise in terms of which investment in the ratings system could be justified. In sum, then, it was the perceived one-sidedness of the test of *personability* set up by the ratings system, the lack of ‘social capital’ that in a perfect connexionist articulation could have been acquired through it, as well as the inability to reliably meet the market test of *profitability*, which shaped PHV (Uber) participants’ evaluations that

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<sup>107</sup> As indicated in the previous chapter and later on in this one, this was only found to be the case with the algorithmic mechanisms of dynamic pricing, job allocations, and commissions.

<sup>108</sup> Among other PHV (Uber) participants who exhibited a certain degree of detachment to the logic of the ratings system were Aziz, Martin and Ajay. Whereas Aziz had been deactivated before, Martin and Aziz answered my questions on the ratings system very briefly, acknowledging the need to avert a suspension/deactivation, but noting that they hadn’t had any problems with keeping their own rating above the minimum threshold. Neither said anything about actively trying to increase their rating. Besides these participants, there were also others who responded in a similar fashion [Jack, Zubair], but were so brief in their response that it appeared to me this was not among the foremost considerations they wanted to discuss in our interview/ride-along; I therefore shifted our dialogue away from the subject.

<sup>109</sup> We can weave into these market evaluations the remote chances of a tip, which may be seen as a reward for deploying one’s *personability* that would make the ratings system more equal, or alternatively, as a monetary return that would increase *profitability*.

actively trying to increase their rating was, simply put, not worth their while. These evaluations, both individually and together, justified a withdrawal of active investment in their interactions with the ratings system. In this regard, David's comment that a sufficient enough average rating [i.e., above 4.5 stars] could be maintained 'without ever trying' is – whilst presenting a vivid contrast to Obi's experience – is revealing of the detachment that *both* PHV (Uber) drivers and riders may develop in their interactions with the ratings system on the Uber app: when a face-to-face encounter has gone 'smoothly enough', rating one's driver/rider may sometimes resemble something like a 'chore', such that quickly tapping on five stars becomes the obvious way to 'get it over with'.

Regardless of the possibility of this detachment, it was clear that a certain amount of everyday investment in the logic of *personability* was still undertaken by PHV (Uber) drivers in order to keep their rating above the minimum threshold. This investment may be viewed through the lens of dramaturgy or 'impression management' (Goffman, 1959; 1961), as drawn upon by Davis (1959) in his study of Chicago cabbies, or that of 'emotion work' (Hochschild, 1979; 1983), as in previous studies on Uber drivers (e.g., Raval and Dourish, 2016; Rosenblat and Stark, 2016; Chan, 2019). Whereas the former underlines 'surface acting', or the recalibration of *outward* impressions across successive micro-level interactions, the latter goes further and focuses on 'deep acting', wherein positive affect is evoked or undesired affect suppressed in a conscious attempt to bring one's *inner* feelings in alignment with one's outward impressions (Hochschild, 1979, p. 558). The key question that arises, then, is this: which of these two frames most closely approximates the forms of *personability* enacted by PHV (Uber) participants in order to keep their rating above the minimum threshold, and why?

I have already indicated that these participants chose not to invest in the ratings system beyond what was required to keep above the minimum threshold: they did not, for instance, offer water bottles or sweets for free, as found in previous US-based studies (Rosenblat, 2018). The

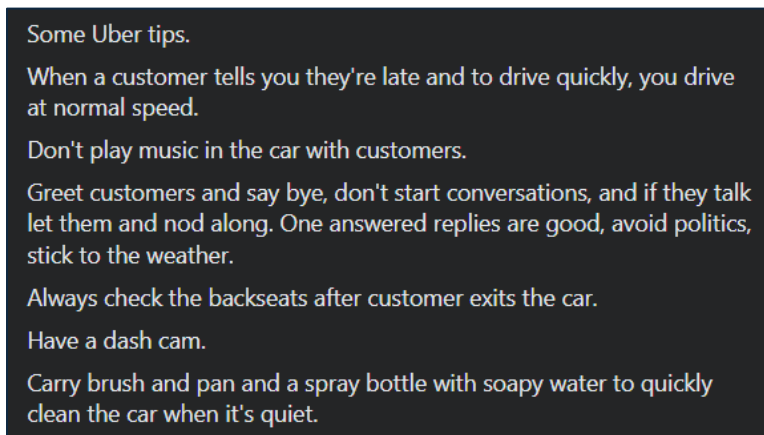
investment they did undertake on an everyday basis was oriented towards preserving their ability to enrol into the *network* of the Uber platform, which is contingent upon meeting the standard of the minimum threshold. In curtailing their alignment with the logic of *personability* to the extent of this goal, they were – in effect – refusing a call to engage in ‘deep acting’ of the kind that the ratings system sought to elicit: one where they would actively seek to qualify themselves as *connexionist* actors in line with that logic. This tells us that whilst the frame of ‘deep acting’ does not exactly map onto the findings of this study, it nonetheless remains insightful<sup>110</sup>, for it directs our attention towards something that has been aptly described by Hochschild (1979) as follows: ‘Deep acting or emotion work, then, can be a form of obeisance to a given ideological stance, *lax emotion management a clue to an ideology lapsed or rejected*’ (p. 567; emphasis added).

The ‘ideological stance’ we are concerned with here pertains to the virtue of *personability* in the *connexionist* order of worth. And ‘lax emotion management’ is understood as encompassing both self-presentation of a kind that does not involve meaningfully working on one’s feelings, or a mix of self-presentation and emotion work that nonetheless curtails affective alignment with the ideological stance that calls for it. The first of these may involve gestures like warmly greeting customers at the start and end of a ride, providing a phone charger, playing music they request on the stereo, and more generally, maintaining a polite demeanour throughout [see, for instance, Figure 22 below]. On the second, Obi’s account is instructive: while he did seem to view his rating as a measure of worth [‘Now I’m an almost 5 star driver...’], this view had been tarnished by successive experiences of low ratings deemed as unfair and/or prejudicial, thereby leading to a *withdrawal of affective investment* from his previous desire to ‘provide some kind of service’ to his customers. In contrast to previous studies, then, PHV (Uber) participants sought to *detach* themselves from the normative logic of the ratings system as much as possible, by either undertaking ‘surface acting’ devoid of the affective investment it sought to elicit, or where affective

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<sup>110</sup> For a critical discussion on the concept, see Brook (2009).

investment was present [‘deep acting’], by pulling back from it. This divergence from the findings of prior research can be attributed, beyond the passage of time [over which the value of Uber fares has declined, and the market became more saturated] and the different national context studied [the UK rather than the US], to the three key reasons outlined above: the evaluation that the ratings system was unjust; that it doesn’t allow for accumulating ‘social capital’; and an insufficiency of *market* worth – something that might have supported a *market-connexionist* compromise from which active investment in this system could follow.



Some Uber tips.

When a customer tells you they're late and to drive quickly, you drive at normal speed.

Don't play music in the car with customers.

Greet customers and say bye, don't start conversations, and if they talk let them and nod along. One answered replies are good, avoid politics, stick to the weather.

Always check the backseats after customer exits the car.

Have a dash cam.

Carry brush and pan and a spray bottle with soapy water to quickly clean the car when it's quiet.

**Figure 22:** Tips for maintaining one's rating, posted in a Facebook group for Uber drivers in the UK

(Facebook, 2024c)

Thus far, we have established that PHV (Uber) participants’ interactions with the ratings system involved a mix of ‘surface acting’ and ‘deep acting’ (Hochschild, 1979), and that their engagement in the latter, where present, was being attenuated over time. As indicated above, it is important to contextualise these observations in relation to the different meanings, and articulations, of the quality of *personability* or ‘being nice’ in the US and the UK, as well as a relative lack of tipping culture in the latter, which reinforces those meanings and articulations. Whereas in the US one could posit, as scholars have (Rosenblat and Stark, 2016), that there has been a translation from tips to ratings in the context of Uber driving, this observation cannot be easily extended to the UK, where anyone who is not *overtly* rude or disrespectful can, quite often,

be deemed as having met the threshold of 5 stars. The previously used phrase that a ride should go ‘smoothly enough’ is helpful in this respect. Of course, meeting this norm is not guaranteed, and any deviations to it would necessitate a higher quotient of *personability* skills on the part of Uber drivers, who are responsible for ensuring it. PHV (own operator + Uber) participant David, for instance, mentioned his encounters with Uber customers who rocked the boat, so to speak, by being rude but expecting to be treated politely in return. Since the rating given by such riders may very well evaluate the driver’s *personability* based on the extent to which they remained ‘even tempered’ (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005, p. 114) during the trip, many PHV drivers who work solely on the Uber app will attempt to carefully maintain such composure. This was not the case for David, however, who classed Uber customers – most of whom paid non-surge, ‘normal’ fares that were deemed unprofitable – in a category that may be likened to that of the ‘yokels’ (Davis, 1959, p. 163). His negative *market* evaluation of the work activity of Uber driving, in which he enrolled only occasionally, had led him to reserve the active deployment of his *personability* skills for his own-operator PHV customers: those who paid good money for it.

To conclude this section, I shall attempt to connect the observations drawn out above, which focused on the nature of PHV (Uber) participants’ investments in the ratings system, with the aspect of ‘intellectual play’ (Davis, 1959), as discussed at the very beginning of the section. What can we learn by juxtaposing enactments of *personability* undertaken by the Chicago cabbies studied by Davis on one end, and by PHV (Uber) participants in this study on the other? The first key divergence here is one that relates to *autonomy*: whereas Chicago cabbies could choose, with reference to recursively composed lay typologies, when to deploy *personability* skills in their everyday interactions with passengers, the codification of this virtue by the ratings system means that PHV (Uber) drivers do not have this choice. They must adhere to the *connexionist* standard set by the minimum threshold, or risk exclusion from the *network* of the platform – a sanction that, as the experiences of full-time Uber drivers Obi and Aziz illustrate, would deprive them of



the ability to make a living. The looming presence of this sanction means that they cannot just ‘opt out’ of being personable: even when they have come across a rider who is ‘challenging’ in some way – one they would rather not deal with – the obligation of ensuring a ‘smooth enough’ encounter still holds. In comparison, Chicago cabbies, and also hackney carriage drivers, have the *autonomy* to deploy their *personability* skills where they see fit: for instance, a London cabbie choosing to do so after picking up someone who, according to their lay typology, is a banker from the City of London. The absence of this *autonomy*, which Boltanski and Chiapello (2005, p. 112) identified as a virtue in itself in the *connexionist* order, is a curious departure from this order of worth in the work relations of Uber driving. It is one that PHV (Uber) participants themselves recognised, in their evaluation that the ratings system is an *unequal* system: one whose design asymmetrically favours the rider irrespective of the circumstances, whilst also hindering their own acquisition of ‘social capital’ along the way.

As Davis (1959) observed many decades ago, the autonomous, strategic deployment of *personability* in taxicab drivers is often driven by the expectation of a monetary reward in the form of a tip. Perhaps the one view universally shared amongst PHV (Uber) participants was that the incidence of tipping in Uber customers is extremely rare, and when it does happen, its mediation by the interface of the app more often than not translates into meagre, borderline insulting amounts being received<sup>111</sup>. Several PHV (Uber) participants narrated that they had received £1 or £2 tips for journeys that cost the rider upwards of £30, while others recalled tips below a single pound – the sort of tip that a Chicago cabbie, or a hackney carriage driver, might have flatly refused. The latter point is purely hypothetical, however, since the app’s removal of the entire face-to-face interaction around exchange of payment means that even the act of refusing such a tip is precluded. This, then, is the second key divergence: the lack of a form of *market* worth

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<sup>111</sup> These accounts on the rarity of tips complicate the previous claim that Uber drivers ‘perform emotional labour *in exchange for ratings instead of tips*’ (Rosenblat and Stark, 2016, p. 3775; emphasis added).

which, together with higher fares, might have supported a *market-connexionist* compromise in terms of which active investment in the ratings system could be justified.

In sum, then, the Uber app brings into play two forms of codification that, against the backdrop of low, unprofitable fares being offered to drivers, disincentivise active investment in the ratings system. By codifying the quality of *personability* in a manner that is judged as unduly hedged in favour of the rider, and which prevents subsequent contact outside of real-time algorithmic matching, it removes the *autonomy* cab drivers used to exercise over the deployment of this quality. And by codifying the face-to-face interaction around exchanging payment through its payment interface, it also diminishes the prospect of a tip. Taken together, these codifying processes erode to a substantial degree two essential conditions [autonomy; prospect of a tip] under which the deployment of *personability* skills in face-to-face interactions can generate ‘intellectual play’ (Davis, 1959). It may be argued, therefore, that they *lessen* the likelihood of intellectual play in the staccato rhythms of the work activity of Uber driving. The diminution of this play may be said to further attenuate PHV (Uber) participants’ willingness to actively invest in the connexionist logic underlying the ratings system.

### ***Information Capital: An Unequal Relation***

#### **(i) Elusive Jobs**

In the preceding section, we examined how Uber’s ratings system constitutes a ‘mechanism of justice’ (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005, p. 126) from the *connexionist* order of worth: one that subjects Uber drivers to a recurring test of *personability* on an everyday basis. We then considered PHV (Uber) participants’ engagements with this test, which they read as being unequal and unjust, and therefore unworthy of active investment. Specifically in relation to the ratings system, this judgement was premised on the *connexionist* evaluation that it sets up an asymmetrical relation with the rider on one end, and the *market* evaluation there is insufficient money [fares; tips] being offered in return for the active, voluntary deployment of *personability* skills on the

other. The first of these evaluations deserves some further attention, for it sheds light upon a broader dynamic that characterises not just the ratings system, but also a number of other key aspects of PHV (Uber) participants' everyday interactions with the Uber app.

The dynamic we are concerned with pertains to the nature of the relationship between Uber and its drivers, which is marked by several asymmetries of *information* that, both individually and cumulatively, violate the ideal of *reciprocity* of information in the connexionist order (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005, p. 119). As morally complex beings, PHV (Uber) participants recognised, and critiqued, this departure from the ideal state of connexionist relations. They knew very well that they were enrolled into a relationship [or in Uber's lexicon, 'partnership'] that was *unequal* in nature: one where Uber can extract their data, charge rent [i.e., commission] at will, but continue to permanently withhold information about the criteria that govern crucial aspects of their work activity. The ratings system was one aspect of work relations wherein this inequality was felt – both in relation to the rider, and to Uber itself, which withheld information about decision-making processes that can lead to sanctions after low ratings and/or reports from riders.

To conclude the chapter, it is worth examining how this unequal relationship was *also* felt in relation to the seemingly unpredictable manner in which jobs were offered by the Uber app, as well as erratic fluctuations in the rate of commission. Both these issues were considered earlier in the previous chapter on the *market* order: the first via its direct relationship with wait times, and the second directly, albeit briefly. They will now be dissected further specifically in terms of PHV (Uber) participants' critiques of the information asymmetries they repeatedly accentuated, which relate directly to the connexionist order of worth. Despite the ongoing mobilisation of subjective understandings and 'stories' to help them make sense of, and navigate, the 'black-boxed' algorithms that determine when jobs are offered and with what commission (Pasquale, 2015; Gregory, 2021), the observation that PHV (Uber) participants continued to feel 'none the wiser'

about these aspects of their work activity is key to reaching a more holistic assessment of their ability to qualify as worthy beings, or lack thereof, in terms of the connexionist order – specifically as it figures in the more immediate realm of their work relations.

Perhaps owing to not being connected with riders in any way, and thus unequivocally attributable to Uber alone, the two issues mentioned above were the cause of even greater frustration in PHV (Uber) participants. The first issue – that of the algorithmic allocation of jobs – most strikingly came to the fore during my one-time engagement with British Pakistani PHV (Uber) participant Aziz. Just a few minutes after he picked me up on a late afternoon outside of Jesmond Dene in Newcastle and then agreed to partake in my research, Aziz let down his guard and quite unreservedly shared what he thought of the work activity he relied on to make a living. As can be seen in the extract below, he started by pointing out that it was easier to get paid as an Uber driver, even in cases where the rider cancels on you – something that he thought made it a better experience than working for a local cab company/traditional PHV operator. So I was slightly taken aback when he immediately followed this up with a furious, affectively charged tirade against not just Uber, but the entirety of the ‘gig economy’:

“I guess one good thing with this [\*points to Uber app\*] is that you always get paid. Even if someone cancels on you, you get the cancellation fee, and it’s all automated so you don’t have to deal with anyone like you would with a local cab company. But this gig economy, they keep you on your toes. *It’s shit. Jobs coming through just when you’re about to give up and go home.* Like just yesterday [Tuesday], I was out from 6pm to about 11pm, and then decided to go home. Suddenly I’m being pinged. It doesn’t make sense because it’s not a weekend, or a Friday night, and there was nothing on [that night]. I don’t get it [\*throws up arm\*]. It’s like *they want you to keep your head in the sand.*”

– Aziz, Newcastle PHV (Uber) driver, ride-along, 3 May 2023

Aziz's indignation on jobs being offered only after long wait times had made him 'give up' and go home provides a vivid illustration of the elusive nature of Uber drivers' interactions with Uber's algorithms, which determine the allocation of jobs, the fares offered, commissions charged, and the onset of sanctions in the event of low ratings or a high cancellation rate (Rosenblat, 2018). We examined in the previous chapter how a rapid supply-side increase in the market for Uber driving has led to longer wait times in-between jobs, as well as a marked decrease in the likelihood of high-value surge fares being offered. As someone who sought to qualify as a *market* actor, Aziz recognised the implications of these shifts, but remained furious over the seemingly prankster-like, affectively disorientating allocation of already-scarce jobs he was now faced with. Clearly, the manner in which these jobs are allocated can either help to fill up drivers' schedules, or – as in Aziz's case – fail to do so, resulting in them waiting for long intervals, and ultimately resigning themselves to the lack of jobs and going home. As we saw in the previous chapter, wait times are also directly tied to the extent to which Uber drivers may experience 'digital lethargy' (Hu, 2022) whilst on the job. Why, then, are they suddenly presented with multiple jobs just before, or after, they decide to end their shift?

One might attribute this to shifting market rhythms: maybe, on the Tuesday being recalled in the extract above, demand *had* picked up around 11pm at night. However, Aziz claimed that this had happened with him on a number of occasions over the past few months, thus constituting a pattern that could not, in his view, be explained away by unexpected upticks in demand on what are normally-quiet weekdays. It is crucial to reiterate here that his frustration over this pattern did *not* have to do with the scarcity of jobs per se, which he could make sense of in terms of market rhythms, but rather his inability to acquire – as an actor enrolled into the *network* of the Uber platform – at least some *information* on how these scarce jobs are allocated. Seen in this context, his critique that the gig economy 'is shit' is being mounted from the standpoint of the connexionist order of worth: despite enrolling into hundreds of *connections* [or 'mini-projects'] over his time

as an Uber driver, he had not been allowed to accumulate ‘information capital’ (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005, p. 79) – skills, knowledge and resources – that could help him position himself in a better manner relative to other, less experienced<sup>112</sup> drivers. This lack of ‘information capital’ translates into a *failure to qualify* as a worthy connexionist actor: one that stares you in the face when the Uber app mysteriously starts ‘pinging’ you *just after* you’ve decided to head home. We touched upon this point earlier in the theoretical overview<sup>113</sup> [Part III]; examining Aziz’s experience now demonstrates how it plays out in practice.

The affective discomfort resulting from the aforementioned failure of qualification hinders alignment with the notion of the ‘choosing self’ (Gregory, 2021), which Uber itself conjures in how it frames its ‘partner-drivers’. This notion implies an actor who is autonomous and entrepreneurial, and thus able to qualify as a worthy connexionist actor in a true sense. That there is a disconnect between Uber’s framing, which directly mobilises this notion, and the reality faced by drivers like Aziz, brings to the fore the ‘one-way transparency’ characteristic of algorithmic management regimens in today’s era of ‘surveillance capitalism’ (Zuboff, 2019). In the case of Uber drivers, this ‘one-way transparency’ means, in very simple terms, that only Uber can accumulate information about the actors [drivers; riders] enrolled into its network, which means that only it knows how jobs are allocated, so you [the Uber driver] should either deal with it, or continue on your way home. I am drawing the latter implication from Aziz’s remark that ‘they want to keep your head in the sand’, through which he was highlighting how he was being asked to pretend like his inability to acquire ‘information capital’ [as well as ‘social capital’] did not really exist, and to continue as normal. Considering that it is Uber drivers who earn revenue [market worth] as well as advance *mediation* for the company, one can imagine why this is felt to be a deeply unpleasant proposition. It shows that even if PHV (Uber) participants were ambivalent

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<sup>112</sup> ‘Experience’, as it is being referred to here, would be indexed not by the time spent in the job but rather the number of *connections* made within the *network* of the Uber platform.

<sup>113</sup> See pp. 69-72.

about the prospect of things changing – as was the case for Aziz – they were under no illusions that the relationship they were enrolled into with Uber was an *unequal* one.

## (ii) Erratic Commissions

Another important aspect of work relations where this starkly unequal relationship manifested itself – in similarly overt fashion – was the commission charged by Uber on every fare, which constitutes a form of rent levied in return for access to its platform (Birch, 2020; Birch and Cochrane, 2022). In the last chapter, we learned of PHV (Uber) participant Zubair’s disappointment over being charged a higher-than-usual commission when he had – quite luckily – stumbled upon a high-value, surge fare. Later on in that same engagement, he elaborated upon this by giving the example of the trip he was taking that very moment with me: from Newcastle to Durham, costing me [the rider] £45, yet he had been offered only £30. That amounts to over 33 percent of the fare being kept by Uber, which exceeds what PHV (Uber) participants described as the ‘normal’ range of the rate of commission: between 15 and 25 percent.

A similar tale was told by Aziz, who mentioned that he was recently charged almost £7 in commission for a job that cost the rider £17. Interestingly, Aziz had only become aware of this after chatting to that rider. When he mentioned this, I told him that I was a bit surprised, as I expected that this information would be included in the digital receipts he could access on the Uber app. He then revealed that while this had been possible previously, it was no longer the case: since Uber’s re-launch<sup>114</sup> of ‘dynamic pricing’ in early 2023 (*Brave New Europe*, 2023; Meaker, 2024), it has been omitting this information from all receipts, showing only the share earned by

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<sup>114</sup> This term was already used by Uber to refer to the algorithmic mechanism through which ‘normal’ Uber fares were calculated. However, as of February 2023, it refers to a different, more extensive pricing model that is marked by much more variability, and which some participants claim amounts to a gradual phasing out of ‘surge pricing’ – at least in practice, if not in name. In August 2022, Uber apprised its UK-based drivers of the introduction of this model as follows: ‘If you joined Uber years ago, you will have joined *when prices were quite simple*. We set prices based on time and distance and then surge helped increase the price when demand was highest. Uber has come a long way since then, and we now have advanced technology that uses years of data and learning to find a competitive price for the time of day, location and distance of the trip’ (*Brave New Europe*, 2023; emphasis added).

the driver. As a consequence, he was now ‘blind to how it [commission] changes’. The experience with that rider led him to suspect bad motive: in the absence of information, he had come to believe that he was now being charged a higher-than-usual commission on *every* job. He was therefore surprised when, upon asking me how much I’d paid for the trip he was taking with me at the end of our ride-along [also from Newcastle to Durham], he discovered that he’d been paid £21 out of the £23 I’d paid, which comes out to be less than 10 percent in commission. Still, his confused remark ‘how can that be!?’ – accompanied by a disgruntled facial expression and a head shake – indicated that this, too, had reminded him of his ‘blindness’.

Eight days after my ride-along with Aziz, I met long-term PHV (own operator + Uber) participant David for another in-person interview. On the agenda was the issue of commissions; we had discussed it before but I felt it pertinent to ask David whether he, too, had encountered the new information asymmetry I’d just come to know of. The following exchange recounts part of this conversation:

Salman: “So the other day, I took an Uber from Newcastle to my house in Durham, and I spoke to the driver about my research and he agreed to do a little interview. At the end of that ride, he asked me what I’d paid for the trip – it was something like 23 quid, and after hearing that he was like: ‘how can that be!?’ Because he’d been paid £21, so the commission was quite low. So I wanted to ask you if you’ve also had this thing where you aren’t able to tell what the commission is?”

David: “When I first signed up [in 2016], it was 20 percent, I remember them telling me that. Since then it’s up, down, up, down...[ ]...I’m pretty sure that you can just click on a trip and see how much the customer paid and how much went to you.”

Salman: “Really? Because that driver was like you can’t do that anymore.”

David: “Huh? Let’s have a look [\*opens Uber app, navigates to receipts\*...[ ]...Right so let’s go into this one, Sherburn House to Durham Marketplace. So, time requested, 8:50. Says paid to me, £7.95.



76 pence holiday pay. And tip. Yes! So, so that used to say how much the customer paid and now it doesn't, very interesting!"

Salman: "Yeah, so that's what I've been hearing. Also saw it on the Uber group [on Facebook]."

David: "Yeah! So they're hiding it now, and that's why nobody's sure anymore. Very interesting!...[ ]...See, I know what people used to do though. Particularly longer trips. You could see what the customer paid, so you could just say to the customer, *I'll just cancel on Uber, give me 40 quid cash, and I'll do it. It's cheaper for you, and I'm getting paid more – everyone's a winner!* So maybe that's why Uber doesn't want people to know. They also keep sending these messages on keeping your cancellation rate low."

Salman: "Yeah, aren't you supposed to keep it below a certain threshold? What happens if it goes too high?"

David: "You lose all your Uber privileges, oooooo! [\*sarcastic laugh\*]...[ ]...I've never heard of someone being suspended over that, but yeah, I think it's still better to have the customer cancel the ride, then do the same thing [\*laughs\*]."

– Interview exchange, Durham, 11 May 2023

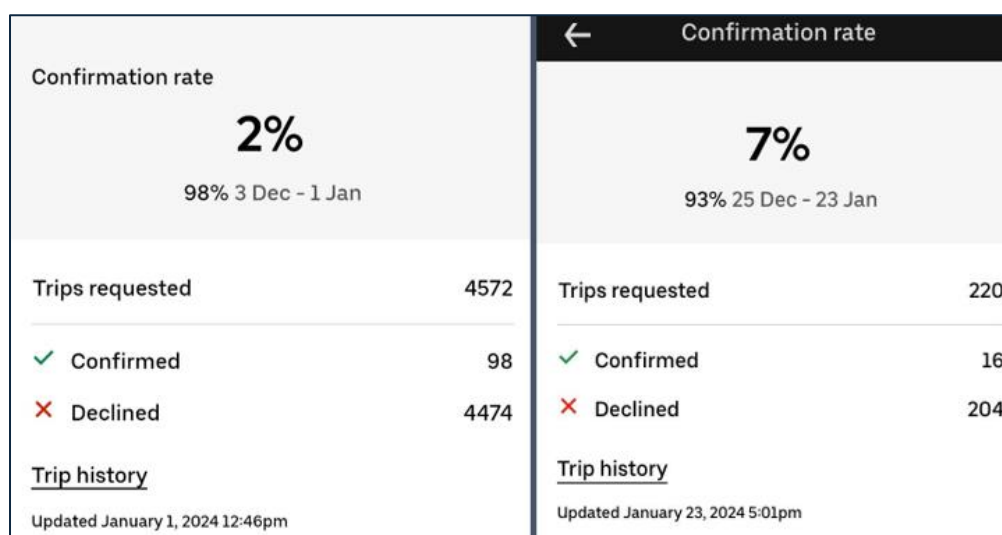
As can be seen above, David did not know that the Uber app was now 'hiding' the amount of commission – he only became aware of this during our meeting itself. It was a particularly memorable moment in my fieldwork: one where I was able to witness – in real time – the unequal nature of the relationship participants had with Uber. In David's case, it was not as much a cause of frustration as in participants who worked solely on the Uber app. Nevertheless, in a later engagement, whilst he was critiquing – for the umpteenth time – declining Uber fares, he said that these fares ought to be 'equal to the hackney rate, with 15 percent commission, *instead of up, down, up, down*'. In doing so, he drew attention to the common factor across *both* fares and commission, or what may be said to be the bottom-line issue: the extreme variability in pay

ushered in by the revamped ‘dynamic pricing’ model. As the extracts examined in this section have demonstrated, the introduction of this model has come with an increased asymmetry of information as compared to before, and thus an even more pronounced inability to acquire ‘information capital’ relating to one’s work activity (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005).

It was not just in Aziz and David’s cases that this increased asymmetry was keenly felt. British Pakistani PHV (Uber) driver Zubair, for instance, pointed to it in his remark that Uber now ‘changes commission as they wish’. Likewise, veteran PHV (Uber + Blueline) participant Martin told me during our ride-along that he was considering getting an own-operator PHV license, as that would allow him to not just set his own fares, but also avoid dealing with the opaque, unpredictable nature of Uber’s fares and commissions, which meant that he had ‘no control’ and was ‘not completely self-employed’. He knew that building up a clientele for his own PHV business would take time, but he thought this was a cost worth paying. His frustration over the unequal relationship he was enrolled into with Uber resonates somewhat with a comment by hackney carriage participant Darlene, who told me that she was not against joining Uber in principle because ‘it’s the future, isn’t it?’, but would only do so ‘if they raised prices and kept commission below 15 percent’. In short, if they either did away with, or significantly curtailed, the extreme variability of its ‘dynamic pricing’ model, which has led to both the view that Uber fares aren’t profitable enough [see previous chapter], as well as a growing realisation that the opacity that characterises its algorithms makes for a starkly inequitable arrangement – one that robs the driver of their dignity, from the standpoint of both the *market* and *connexionist* worlds.

It is this indignity that led David to mock, in no uncertain terms, the ‘privileges’ offered by the Uber app, and gleefully devise a new, recalibrated strategy to game its algorithms: getting *the customer* to cancel the ride, so your cancellation rate doesn’t go up. These privileges were seen by David as empty gestures; one of them, for example, was ‘status protection’, which means riders being able to see on the app that you’re a ‘Gold’ or ‘Platinum’ driver for a fixed period of time –

something that he thought was meaningless since ‘nobody [i.e., no customer] gives a shit’ about it anyway. Whereas participants were aware that a particularly low cancellation rate, like under 5 percent, may trigger a suspension of their account (Rosenblat, 2018), it should be noted that a related metric – that of the acceptance or confirmation rate – was, unlike in Rosenblat’s study, not known to be subject to any sanctions. It is therefore interesting to note that a number of posts on the Facebook group of UK Uber drivers I followed indicated that it is trending downwards: drivers are declining more and more job offers by letting them ‘time out’ [see Figure 23 below], *despite* wait times trending upwards.



**Figure 23:** Screenshot of acceptance rate posted in a Facebook group for Uber drivers in the UK (left; Facebook, 2024d), and David's acceptance rate (right)

### ***Outro: Connexionist Logics Within and Beyond Uber Driving***

Having examined a number of aspects of PHV (Uber) participants’ everyday life engagements with the *connexionist* order, let us conclude the chapter by taking stock of their overall relationship with this order of worth. As the progression of analysis in this chapter has indicated, this requires a distinction between the way in which this order of worth figures in the more immediate realm of their *work relations*, and in the wider realm of relations of which those work relations form

part. In the former realm, PHV (Uber) participants were faced with certain frustrating failures of qualification, which further compounded the disquiet associated with their concurrent failure to qualify as *market* actors. Most notably, unlike ‘great men’ in the connexionist world, they were faced with an inability to acquire ‘information capital’ and ‘social capital’ (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005, p. 79) by way of their work activity, which made itself evident in their everyday interactions with several key aspects of their work activity: the ratings system, the temporally unpredictable manner in which jobs were offered, and erratic fluctuations in fares and commissions. The information asymmetries inherent in these interactions point toward an articulation of work relations that, whilst mobilising a number of virtues from the *market* world, also marks a departure from that world, for it does not uphold the ideal of ‘pure and perfect information’. This absence of perfect information is indicative of a partial shift towards a connexionist form of coordination – one where representations are local, singular, and fragmented, and where ‘there can be no question of an overarching representation’ (p. 113).

It is this locality of representations, and the information from which they are formulated, that renders the connexionist world particularly vulnerable ‘to the strategic practices of withholding information, not circulating it, in order to derive an advantage that is unwarranted in terms of [this world’s] values’ (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005, p. 130). In this context, it is important to recall that the subjective understandings and ‘stories’ devised by platform workers (Gregory, 2021) comprise a form of local representations. However, these are only of limited effectiveness, since Uber *does not circulate* to its ‘partner-drivers’ any concrete information [e.g., on the criteria underpinning ‘dynamic pricing’] that could be drawn upon in formulating them. In an ideal articulation of connexionist relations, such information could be ‘unlocked’ in exchange for the greater number of *connections* drivers had made possible in the *network* of the platform [and the information/data pertaining to those connections] (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005, p. 113), thereby putting them on a better footing relative to other local/regional drivers. So whereas

Uber could be said to qualify as a worthy connexionist actor in a number of ways – from the rapidity and sheer number of *connections* its platform makes possible, its adept use of *personal relations*, its codification of *personability* in the ratings system, and so forth – this qualification ultimately relies on an unequal relationship<sup>115</sup> with its ‘partner-drivers’ [and riders] that allows for ‘obtaining information [data] without reciprocation’ (p. 131), as well as the extraction of rents (Birch, 2020; Birch and Cochrane, 2022).

Notably, it was PHV (Uber) participants’ recognition of *what it took* to qualify as a worthy connexionist actor – most crucially the ability to accumulate ‘information capital’ and ‘social capital’ – that led them to critique Uber in terms of the same order of worth that it most visibly aligns itself with<sup>116</sup>. Having diagnosed that the reality of their work relations throttled such a qualification, but continued to further Uber’s ability to achieve it, they saw through the unequal nature of their relationship in all its nakedness: as Aziz succinctly put it during our engagement, they could see that they were ‘being shafted’. It is no surprise, then, that this feeling – an outcome of failures of qualification tied to both the *market* and *connexionist* orders – has also overflowed into protests staged by Uber drivers (Aslam and Woodcock, 2020). If we recall the very end of the last chapter on the *market* order, I mentioned a strike organised by Uber drivers in the UK, US and Canada on Valentine’s Day 2024. It is now an appropriate time to add that the demands of the protest held by UK-based drivers on this day, as of protests held before, included those in which their failures to qualify as connexionist actors were *also* implicated: in their calls for a fixed rate of commission, transparency of fares, addressing the disparity in power vis-à-vis the rider in

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<sup>115</sup> The starkly unequal variation of this dynamic observed in this ethnographic study begs the question of whether, and to what extent, the ideal of ‘reciprocity’ (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005, p. 119) can be meaningfully upheld in a world increasingly moving towards the adoption of *connexionist* logics, especially where they now figure in a compromise with monetary imperatives from the *market* world.

<sup>116</sup> I have addressed this alignment in the theoretical overview earlier [see Chapter 3.2], as well as in the section titled ‘Personal Relations, and Tolerance’ in this chapter.

the ratings system [see Figure 24 below]. I will return to the implications of this in the conclusion of the thesis.



**Figure 24:** Poster showing demands for protest held on Valentines Day 2024, shared on a Facebook group for Uber drivers in the UK (Facebook, 2024e)

Let us close this chapter by briefly considering, once again, PHV (Uber) participants' relationship with the connexionist order in the wider realm of relations they were situated in – that of the entire spectrum of *projects* they were engaged in. This realm – quite interestingly – painted a different, less despairing picture. Here, participants were able to call upon certain valuable 'lifelines' in terms of which they could – despite the failures of qualification they faced in their work relations – attribute connexionist worth to themselves as well as to their work activity, which may be viewed as a primary 'everyday project' among a portfolio of such projects. These 'lifelines' were extended on one end by the *flexibility* afforded by their work activity to switch over into, and acquire connexionist worth from, other 'everyday projects' [e.g., family life], and on the

other by the accumulation of connexionist worth across successive ‘life projects’. Tapping into resources of self-worth that lay beyond the work relations of Uber driving, these ‘lifelines’ supported the formation of *market-connexionist* compromises in terms of which continued enrolment in those work relations could be justified, or at least contended with.

Notably, the manner in which these ‘lifelines’ were drawn on by participants was implicit and singular, in that it did not showcase the sort of holistic recognition of an order of worth that was seen with respect to the *market* and *industrial* orders. This indicates that despite integrating itself into more and more arenas of social life, and blurring the boundaries that previously separated them, the *connexionist* order continues to be not as cognitively clear, and recognisable, of a justificatory register or ‘evaluative framework’ (Boltanski and Thévenot, 2006) for the actors who invoke its virtues. In the specific context of this study, it appeared as a relatively murkier, more fragmented terrain, as indicated by both the lack of recognition of a holistic framework of ideals and the relations between them [as posited by Boltanski and Chiapello], and the way in which specific virtues were mobilised in isolation and placed in a *compromise* (Thévenot, 2002) with virtues from another, more decipherable order of worth [*market*; *industrial*], thereby leading to a new articulation of work relations. Traces of this polity were, however, fully recognisable to the extent that they had acquired a ‘common-sense’ nature, as we saw for instance with the virtues of *mediation* and *flexibility*, and the broadly affirmative manner in which they were invoked by PHV (Uber) participants.

## 5.4. The Interplay between Figurational Positioning and Orders of Worth

### *From What to Who: Shifting from A Battle of Values to A Battle of Status*

The last three chapters have interrogated the decline of hackney carriage and the rise of Uber in the UK's taxicab industry – first outlined through a review of secondary data in the Background section of the thesis [Part II] – in terms of shifting ‘orders of worth’ (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005; Boltanski and Thévenot, 2006). The pragmatic sociology frame of ‘orders of worth’ was mobilised in an empirically driven analysis of the qualified accordance of value or ‘worth’ in the economic ordering of the taxicab trade: how this has shifted, and with what implications and repercussions for the actors involved. We learned of the decline of *industrial* logics that had previously been a source of self-worth for hackney carriage drivers, and how this is felt as a deep, painful loss that is hard to make sense of. Next, we delved into the relatively modern ‘taxi world’ of Uber driving – one shaped by a range of *market* and *connexionist* logics. While these logics offered PHV (Uber) participants different means to qualify themselves as worthy actors, they also presented a number of difficulties, speaking about which often led to the onset of ambivalence<sup>117</sup>. Crucial here was these participants’ ability, as morally equipped, complex beings, to formulate *compromises* between logics from different orders of worth (Thévenot, 2002) – something that enabled them to extract some form of a worthy qualification of themselves after all [e.g., in terms of *flexibility*], even where they acceded that they were falling short of a more sought after qualification [e.g., that of a worthy *market* actor].

By examining how these orders of worth figured in the work relations inhabited by hackney and PHV participants, and in the tests and trials those relations present on an everyday basis, the analysis undertaken over the past three chapters has sought to bring forth the intricacies

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<sup>117</sup> Ajay's use of the phrase ‘I don't know’ in response to a question about how might the issue of low fares and supply side increases might be resolved, and Aziz bursting out laughing at a question on being self-employed versus working for Uber, are just two cases in point.



of the manner in which platformisation and the rise of Uber has uprooted the preceding, pre-Uber economic ordering of the UK's taxicab trade – in fact, it would not be far off the mark to say that much of that ordering has now been turned on its head. It is striking that this has happened despite there being no formal changes to the 'two-tier' statutory framework for taxicabs in the country; conversely, and as the controversy of 'cross-border hire' throws into stark relief, it is only as a result of local displacements<sup>118</sup> to the way in which this framework *practically* functioned across space and time that the trade has assumed the form it takes today. One may argue that these recent displacements are no different than those comprising a longer process of 'deregulation'<sup>119</sup>, which one might trace back to the point when the *Transport Act 1985* first removed quantitative controls on the supply side [see Chapter 2.1.]. While this would be a fair assessment, one cannot but take note of the pace of the acceleration post Uber's arrival, and the pivotal role of the company's burgeoning operation in bringing this about.

Thus far in the thesis, we have examined the multifaceted fallout of the aforementioned shift through the prism of *moral regimes*: how they underpin and constitute different economic orderings in the two 'taxi worlds' of hackney carriage and Uber driving, what comes to be valued in them, and the points of contestation that arise in the course of such evaluations – applicable as they are to persons, activities and things. The chapter on the *connexionist* order somewhat differed from this in that it also examined certain sources of self-worth [e.g., family life] that lie beyond the realm of work relations, yet the overall focus remained on how these came to be drawn on in the formation of compromises in relation to the *work relations* of Uber driving, and the myriad evaluations tied to these. The participants whose accounts were taken up in analysing these attributions of worth were often referred to as 'actors' – a generic referent for social actors

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<sup>118</sup> Boltanski and Chiapello (2005) described the rise of *connexionist* logics in everyday life in similar terms.

<sup>119</sup> Many Durham-based participants delineated 2007 as the starting point of 'deregulation': the year when a number of smaller licensing areas in County Durham were merged into a single unitary authority. As mentioned in one of David's accounts earlier, this led to a rapid crash in the value of hackney carriage licenses, which fell from about £35,000 to £300 'overnight'. It was only as a result of this lowering of barriers that David, then a PHV driver, was able to set foot into the hackney carriage trade.

engaged in a given work activity, together with the tests and trials it involves on an everyday basis. Whilst this referent is useful for focusing attention upon the specificity of everyday tests/trials, virtues, logics, technological actants and myriad other elements that partake in moral-pragmatic disputes in the wake of platformisation – in other words towards *what* exactly figures in those disputes – one might also take a step back and ask: but *who* are these actors, impacted as they are by these disputes over shifting orders of worth?

Clearly, these actors are not ‘just actors’; nor are they ‘just taxicab [hackney carriage/PHV] drivers’. The referent ‘actors’ has the weakness of suggesting that the individuals in question have the ability to qualify as worthy beings in terms of the three orders of worth [*industrial; market; connexionist*] as if they have no history attached to them, no identity or group membership that bears on the socio-material environment in which they lead their lives: put crudely, that there is no ‘baggage’ involved. As I noted in the theoretical overview [Part III] earlier, this is not the case. According to Thévenot (2007), the degree to which an actor can qualify themselves in terms of virtues from one or another order of worth is shaped by the social milieu or environment they inhabit, which constrains possibilities for action across the vertical plane of the three levels of engagement with the world: familiarity, planned action, and justification [i.e., orders of worth]. And although this line of inquiry was not explicitly pursued by Thévenot, one can infer from his premise that the means for *qualifying* one’s self-worth, for instance work opportunities, differ based on the environment of the actor in question: whereas one actor may be able to access opportunities that allow for an *industrial* qualification, and the prestige of being a ‘professional’ that comes with this, another actor may only have access to work opportunities shaped by the *market* and *connexionist* orders, as in the case of driving for Uber. I argued that one useful way of interrogating this differential access to worthy qualifications is to approach it from the Eliasian viewpoint of *figurational relations*, which focuses on how an actor’s environment is shaped by their membership of a social group interdependent with other social groups, and the myriad

power differentials tied to this. Several allusions to this dimension of *figurational relations* have been made so far: in mentions that a particular participant was a Pakistani *mangetar* or second generation British Asian; in Nigerian PHV (Uber) participant Obi's account of racism encountered on the job; as well as in the examination of what was referred to as the 'wider realm' of relations in the chapter on the *connexionist* world. These allusions were intended to signal participants' *figurational positioning*: whether they belong to an established or outsider/newcomer group in the local community where they reside, and the figurations it is composed of.

Such indicatory signals, however, do not suffice. My ethnographic fieldwork made it abundantly clear that *figurational relations* were affected by, and affected, the realm of *work relations*: there was a realisation very early on that the 'story' of these participants cannot be done justice to without an attempt at considering the interplay between *both* these dimensions. Yet at the same time, the depth and complexity of findings pertaining to shifts in the economic ordering of the taxicab trade, the theoretical framework employed in analysing those shifts [which did not prove particularly amenable to the weaving in of concepts on a different subject matter], the data collected [which leant considerably towards the former kind of analysis], and practical constraints on time and the length of this thesis meant that both these dimensions could not, regrettably, be considered in their entirety. Such is the nature of trade-offs in any sociological enquiry involving fieldwork over some amount of time – one inevitably finds that there are, in fact, more than one dimensions or prisms to the same problem. And, as in the case of this research, the gravity of the realisation may be such that it persists even when fieldwork, as well as the bulk of writing up, has already concluded. How, then, should one proceed?

The strategy pursued here is to undertake a partial attempt at dissecting certain salient aspects of the *interplay* between the two dimensions encountered; it is to this end that this final findings chapter has been enrolled into the structure of this thesis. In light of the aforementioned realisation, this chapter briefly shifts the prism of analysis towards how certain tensions and

conflicts inherent in the dimension of *figurational relations* interact with, and relate to, those constituting the moral dimension of *orders of worth*, as examined over the past three chapters. I noted earlier that the nature of this interaction is understood in terms of Deleuze and Guattari's (1984) notion of 'reciprocal presupposition'. It is a case of uneven, non-linear relationality; one approximation of it is to say that there were 'figurational aspects' to points of contestation over qualifications in terms of virtues from different orders of worth, just like conflicts tied to those orders modulated tensions of a figurational nature. Whilst the latter kind of interaction, which would require the assumption of a viewpoint that foregrounds figurational relations, cannot be pursued at present, this chapter seeks to bring forth a few contours of the former – as encountered over the course of ethnographic fieldwork.

The few salient findings on figurational relations that came forth from these encounters are conceptualised here in terms of Elias and Scotson's (1994) framework of established-outsider relations. As mentioned previously, it was these findings themselves that prompted a deeper engagement with Elias' theoretical work on figurations. The forthcoming analysis has been delimited to three such elements, whose relevance to this study was discussed earlier in the theoretical overview [Part III]: the affective consequences that follow the decline of established groups; the enduring effects of 'group charisma' and 'group disgrace' on members of [current or former] established and outsider/newcomer groups, respectively; and the question of how racial and ethnic differences come to be enrolled in the former two processes. It should be noted that with respect to the second element, my aim is neither to confirm nor dispel the accuracy of assertions of group charisma or group disgrace, but rather to bring forth the work they do in shaping the nature of figurational tensions, as well as how these interact with the moral realm of orders of worth. All in all, it is based on these elements that the forthcoming analysis has been organised. A common thread running through all of them is the accordance of self-worth, which

featured prominently in the past three chapters; its relational production is now approached in terms of figurational relations.

In examining ethnographic findings relating to each of the three aforementioned elements of Elias and Scotson's (1994) account, I place them in conversation with a number of supplemental resources. These notably include Kalra's (2000) ethnographic account of the work trajectories of first and second generation British Pakistani men [*babas* and *kakas*] in the town of Oldham in North West England; socio-historical accounts of the post-WW2 'golden age' and the subsequent period of industrial decline, along with the nature of labour migration from developing countries across both these periods (Hobsbawm, 1994; Byrne, 2002); the notion of 'feeling rules' (Hochschild, 1979; 2016), which is employed in decoding the *affective* consequences of the decline of formerly established groups; and socio-spatial conceptualisations of racialisation drawn from work in human geography (Swanton, 2010a). The former two resources lend important historical context to the analysis, whilst the latter two are mobilised in an attempt to hone, and extend, the application of the primary framework of established-outsider relations. In light of the findings of this particular study, I will seek to trace both continuities and discontinuities with what Elias and Scotson (1994) put forth as a 'paradigmatic model' for figurational enquiries; certain points for possible revisions to this model, which they supported<sup>120</sup>, will be brought forth.

The final preliminary step before delving into the upcoming analysis is to provide a sketch of which established and outsider/newcomer groups were encountered in the course of this study. As will be seen shortly, there will be an ongoing focus on two groups to which most of my *long-term participants* belonged: White English with longstanding family roots in the former mining villages surrounding the city of Durham; and second-generation British Asians<sup>121</sup> who grew up in

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<sup>120</sup> See Elias and Scotson (1994, pp. 22-3).

<sup>121</sup> All such participants were of Mirpuri/(Azad) Kashmiri, or more broadly, Pakistani heritage (see Kalra, 2000, pp. 34-5 on reasons for distinguishing the former from the latter). In the first instance, however, they always referred to themselves as 'Asians'.

the West End of Newcastle<sup>122</sup>. It is from recurring engagements with participants belonging to these two groups that the majority of insights on figural matters were obtained, and the different figural trajectories that characterise their communities allow for a fruitful engagement with the three elements specified above. The former comprise an ‘established’ group in a communal sense, and this is reflected in their dominant position in the Durham hackney carriage and PHV sectors; however, the differential in power resources commanded by them vis-à-vis other, newcomer groups has been in steady decline. They will form the focus of the first section, on the affective consequences of the decline of former established groups. As for the latter, they have gradually moved from an ‘outsider’/newcomer towards an ‘established’ positioning in their areas of residence, and now form the majority in the once predominantly White British [Geordie] Newcastle hackney carriage trade. Yet they retain the traces of their past outsider status. Accounts given by members of this group will be engaged with in the second section, where I focus on the intriguing manner in which ‘group disgrace’ (Elias and Scotson, 1994) continued to both implicate them on one end, and was mobilised by them in relation to more recent outsiders/newcomers on the other. Finally, in the third section, I draw on all these observations in considering how the process of racialisation figures in the figural conflicts encountered over the course of this research. Across the three sections, the analysis undertaken proceeds in a cumulative fashion, whereby observations in one section are taken up and elaborated upon further in the following sections.

### ***Industrial Decline, Former Established Groups, and Feeling Rules***

I reported previously that the first three participants I recruited in my fieldwork were Durham-based taxicab drivers: Alistair and Darlene, who were hackneys, and David, a PHV driver with prior experience in the hackney trade. All of them were White English locals, with multi-

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<sup>122</sup> Names of particular mining [‘pit’] villages in Durham/neighbourhoods in Newcastle have been omitted for confidentiality reasons.

generational family roots in County Durham. Due to being older<sup>123</sup> than David, who was in his early thirties, Alistair and Darlene were relatively better acquainted with the heights of industrial prosperity enjoyed by the North East up until the late 1970s, and had witnessed the sharp decline of the region in the years since, with all its misfortunes of mass unemployment, rising welfare dependency, a shift towards other forms of low-skilled manual work [including taxicab driving], and a widespread feeling of despair that came to permeate their communities. The pain of this transition comes through in the following two accounts they gave of the present state of their communities:

“I remember the 1984 miners’ strike. Margaret Thatcher set out to break the unions. She knew she’d have to break the miners’ union for that. And she did it, she broke the miners. There was massive unemployment...[ ]...They gave around £20,000 to miners [after the closure of the mines], and when it ran out, they went on benefits. A lot of people I went to school with, their children, sometimes three generations, you walk 10 minutes out of the city centre and you’ll see families like that, they’ve never worked...[ ]...The North East never recovered. That value for the hard graft, you don’t have it anymore. *When they took our work away, they took our pride away.*”

– Alistair, Durham hackney carriage driver, in-person interview, 20 October 2022

“Communities were decimated [by the closure of the mines]. There’s no hope, no community spirit in those communities, there’s nothing left now, is there?...[ ]...*It’s never gonna recover.* It wasn’t just the mines that closed down – [with it] the shops and all also closed down...[ ]...*There’s a lot of apathy, and with that there’s a lot of escapism, with people drinking and doing drugs. That’s why the students find the town [Durham] scary, it’s because of the locals’ behaviour. I start getting anxious at the rank when it’s about 5pm on Saturday [for the same reason].*”

– Darlene, Durham hackney carriage driver, in-person interview, 15 February 2023

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<sup>123</sup> Alistair shared at one point that he’s 60 years old, whilst Darlene may be described as ‘middle-aged’, with an adult daughter who lives away. She said she was ‘young’ at the time of the 1984 miners’ strike, and didn’t fully witness the impact these events had upon her community as she moved away to the South.

The 'pride' and 'community spirit' being reminisced by Alistair and Darlene relate to a figural dynamic – a lost time when their local, White English communities formed more of an established group than they are now. For many decades, they had access to stable, well-paid<sup>124</sup> employment in mines making up the Great Northern Coalfield, heavy engineering, shipbuilding and commodity-producing factories; a strong stake in local government through a combination of community representatives and 'corporatist' arrangements (Byrne, 2002, p. 284); and on a broader level, upward social mobility – a tangible sense that they could lead a life that was significantly better off than their predecessors<sup>125</sup>. Alistair himself had worked in a local mine in his early twenties, and fondly recalled the 'camaraderie' that characterised them: hundreds of men 'from sixteen to sixty years old' coming together in the 'pit bath', 'stark naked', to wash themselves off in the evening, and then making their way to the local pub for a drink. He did accede to a flipside of this – a toxic, 'rough' work environment that translated into shorter life expectancies – but saw it as being co-constitutive of the 'honour' that this work bestowed upon everyone who did it. Like Darlene, he linked together the closure of the mines and the deterioration of 'community infrastructure', which had supported a way of life organised around employment in those mines. Taken together, these participants' accounts indicate that this three-way nexus – access to well-paid work in the mines and other industrial centres of employment, the community infrastructure, and an ability to *feel* aspiration for oneself and one's loved ones – formed the bedrock of a high degree of integration and 'internal cohesion' within their communities (Elias

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<sup>124</sup> This is an understatement, for several scholars, starting with Adam Smith in *The Wealth of Nations*, have noted that from as early as the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, the 'pitmen' of North East England were the 'highest paid manual workers in the UK' (see Byrne, 2002, p. 282).

<sup>125</sup> On one end, the availability of high-paid industrial jobs in the North East preceded both world wars (Byrne, 2002). On the other end, the 'golden age' from the end of the second world war up until the economic crisis of the 1970s and 1980s was one of 'full employment', with a mere 1.5 percent of the labour force out of work in Europe by the 1960s (Van der Wee, 1987, cited in Hobsbawm, 1994, p. 267). Combined with a 'secular boom' and 'genuine mass consumption', this period 'utterly transformed the lives of working-class people', uplifting most of them 'well above the threshold below which their fathers, or they themselves, had once lived: where income is primarily spent on basic necessities' (Hobsbawm, pp. 306-307).



and Scotson, 1994), which has since broken down; a perceived upsurge in alcoholism and drug abuse, particularly in young people, is taken as being symptomatic of this loss.

At the time recounted by Alistair and Darlene, David was a young child, growing up in a neighbourhood at the outer edges of the boundaries of Durham city. Yet, when I asked him how his community had been impacted by this period, he went speechless, taking an almost ten second pause before uttering: ‘that’s a tough question’. There were three main takeaways from the account he then went on to give. First, he also expressed a profound sense of sadness that ‘communities are nothing like they supposed to be’, underlining once again the breakdown of cohesion, which in the past had been reinforced by people ‘working [in the mines], living, *and* drinking in the same pubs together’, as well as young people knowing that they ‘must respect’ their elders, since many of them would have been their supervisors in the mines. Second, he narrated that despite a wave of unemployment having already begun, there ‘was so much more on offer in the eighties’, noting the range of community initiatives run by the council, including ‘six or so sports centres’ and ‘a lot of youth clubs’ that he’d been able to benefit from during his school years. He ‘wasn’t sure’ of the state of council-run facilities now, but having done some youth work in his twenties, he lamented that a ‘lot less of it happens now’. Finally, he linked the ‘mass, mass unemployment’ that had reached its apex by the start of the 1990s to a difficult transition from what was considered high-skilled manual work (Byrne, 2002, p. 284-85), to other forms of manual work, which paid significantly less. Examples cited of the latter included small-scale businesses focusing on landscaping, gardening, household repairs, as well as taxicab driving; in his estimation, the majority of Durham-based taxicab drivers, and especially the ‘classic, old-school ones’, were ‘working-class’, hailing from the same communities that had been ‘absolutely devastated’ by industrial decline.

The powerful stories told by these participants provide some insight into the figurational trajectory of their local, predominantly White English communities, which may now be

characterised as established groups in decline. For as long as the *industrial* world was the dominant mode of economic and social organisation in Britain, these communities were well placed to benefit from it – something that lasted for multiple generations. Then came the shock of deindustrialization, which Byrne (2002) has fittingly described as ‘a descent from the heights to the depths’ (p. 825). Drawing attention to this collective experience, and the memory of it, is important since only those who *shared* in it – either personally or through the passage of ramifications from their ancestors – can be counted as members of the established groupings of the pit villages to which these participants belonged. Following the closure of the mines and other industrial centres of mass employment, a deep-seated change in what kind of work opportunities could be taken up by members of these groups went hand and hand with a loss of material-symbolic power resources on a local scale, internal cohesion, and positive affect<sup>126</sup>, and this in turn weakened their position vis-à-vis various outsiders/newcomers who came to live in their areas as Britain moved towards a predominantly service sector economy.

All three participants quoted above *knew* – as a matter of fact – that these changes had already transpired. However, and as Elias notes regarding the protracted affective consequences of the downfall of established groups, ‘it may take a long time before the reality shock sinks in’ (Elias and Scotson, 1994, p. xlv). Consistent with his observation, the ‘rewarding self-love’ and ‘grace and mission’ that characterised these participants’ groups in ‘the days of their greatness’ (p. xliii) had not, or not yet, been decoupled from the manner in which they placed their own individual selves within their communal groups: their ‘we-image’. This is discernible in the melancholic<sup>127</sup> invocations of ‘pride’ and ‘community spirit’ in Alistair and Darlene’s accounts

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<sup>126</sup> The ripple-like nature of the loss of positive affect, which can be discerned in Alistair and Darlene’s accounts, can be attributed in part to the persistence of an ‘industrial structure of feeling’ beyond the waning of the industrial world (see Byrne, 2002, p. 287). For those whose fortunes have declined, this can be a recurring reminder of a loss of purpose: ‘And yet, in all working-class communities, so many of them ravaged now by *the extinction of their original industrial function*, people have been talking ever since I can remember about their sense of loss’ (Seabrook, 1982, p. 32; emphasis added).

<sup>127</sup> Once again, as Elias and Scotson say: ‘It is as if they were saying: if we can’t live up to the we-image of the time of our greatness, nothing is really worth doing’ (1994, p. xlvi).

above: they continued to reach out for that superior worth – qualified not just in terms of the *industrial* order of worth, but also in human, ‘by nature’ terms (Elias and Scotson, 1994, p. 103; Stanley, 2017, para. 5.7) – that their groups once possessed, but no longer command.

It is precisely this ‘lag in self-image and self-evaluation ‘catching up’ with the new power ratios’ (Stanley, 2017, para. 6.8), and specifically in an affective sense, that led some of these White English participants to delineate group boundaries in the taxicab trade in a manner that partly retained the idealised ‘we-image’ of their former industrial communities. We will shortly see in the following section how they emotionally distanced themselves from, and attacked – implicitly and sometimes overtly – those perceived to be outsiders/newcomers in line with these boundaries. Such boundaries are reproduced by way of ‘feeling rules’<sup>128</sup> that are unique to members of a communal group – notions of what they ought to feel about *their* predicaments, past and present, and where and to whom their sympathies may be directed (Hochschild, 2016, p. 227). For the White English hackneys interviewed in this study, these predicaments now included conflicts over the economic ordering of the taxicab trade, where a number of people from their communities had found work. In their case, one might say that figurational fault lines had come to overwrite economic ones, and vice versa. Consider this: why was seemingly Westminster-driven<sup>129</sup> ‘deregulation’ – starting in 2007 with the merging of smaller licensing areas in County Durham into a unitary authority, and continuing all the way to the unprecedented rise in PHV licensing and ‘cross-border hire’ that has followed Uber’s entry into the market – such a painful thing to witness for these hackneys? Part of the answer certainly has to do with a sense of indignation at the decline of *industrial* logics in the economic organisation of the taxicab trade. Also at play, however, are the ‘feeling rules’ (Hochschild, 2016) that run through those in the trade

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<sup>128</sup> Hochschild’s notion has been drawn upon here in extending the meaning of what Elias and Scotson referred to as the ‘the rules of affective thinking’ (1994, p. 102) that characterise figurational relations.

<sup>129</sup> The reasons underlying this perception of central government meddling were addressed in Chapter 2.2 [‘Shake It Up: The Controversial Rise of Uber’].

who hail from White English communities decimated by deindustrialization<sup>130</sup> – people who reckon they likely would have never taken up this form of work if it weren't for that tragedy. They read this 'deregulation', which has enabled hordes of outsiders/newcomers to 'easily' enter their trade and come into competition with them, as a *continuation* of the institutional battering of their formerly established groups: as if being forgotten was not enough, they are being put down over and over again. It accentuates, in an affective sense, the erosion of the superior worth their groups once used to command, underpinned as it was by differentials of material-symbolic resources, internal cohesion, and positive affect, and the relative inability of outsider/newcomer groups to impinge upon these.

### ***Group Charisma, Group Disgrace***

In the preceding section, I have at various points alluded to the positive affect that characterises [current or former] 'established' groups, borrowing the terms 'rewarding self-love', 'mission and grace', 'superior virtue' and 'idealised we-image' from Elias and Scotson's (1994) account in indicating the multifaceted character of this. It is now time to go further in dissecting the affective dimension of figurational relations, which implicates members not only of established but also outsider/newcomer groups, in differing-yet-interdependent ways. At the core of this dimension lies what Elias and Scotson termed a 'structural regularity' of established-outsider relations: a '*pars pro toto* distortion in opposite directions' whereby the 'we-image' of the established tends to be modelled on the 'minority of the best' in their group, whilst the image of outsiders/newcomers corresponds to the 'minority of the worst' (Elias and Scotson, 1994, p. xix; emphasis in original). This leads to an affective battle that is waged over time in terms of the

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<sup>130</sup> There were a few broad parallels between the views of participants from these communities, like Alistair and Darlene, and the Louisiana-based, Republican-leaning American Southerners studied by Hochschild in *Strangers in Their Own Land: Anger and Mourning on the American Right* (2016). The foremost of these was their grievance over perceived unfairness – what Hochschild's interviewees called 'cutting in line' – on part of outsider/newcomer groups [e.g., immigrants, Blacks, Asians, etc.], and the political establishment's betrayal in enabling this.

interdependent, reciprocal dynamics of *group charisma* and *group disgrace*: whereas the former denotes the manner in which the established are able to lay claim to, and identify with, the ‘rewarding self-love’ and ‘superior virtue’ [what I hitherto termed ‘positive affect’] that they believe characterises their group as a whole, the latter refers to the tainting of individual outsiders by the collective denigration inflicted on their groups by the established (Elias and Scotson, pp. 104-105). Often taking the form of slurs and stigmatising invectives, the mobilisation of group disgrace by the established in relation to the outsiders plays an essential role in reinforcing to themselves their own group charisma – their superiority in human, ‘by nature’ terms (Stanley, 2017). It is important to reiterate here that these dynamics always operate as a *process*, such that they may be attenuated over time by shifts in the relative power differentials [length of residence; access to material-symbolic resources; internal cohesion] of communal groups locked together in interdependence; nevertheless, perhaps one of the most astute observations in Elias’ work on figurations is that their affective impact ‘usually has a deep anchorage in the personality structure’ of members of both kinds of groups (Elias and Scotson, 1994, p. 103) – something that can linger on for generations, well beyond any shifts in figurational positioning.

Over the course of ethnographic fieldwork, it became evident that this lingering, carry-on effect of group charisma and group disgrace continued to exert a modulating influence upon the ‘feeling rules’ (Hochschild, 2016) of participants belonging to both groups that form the focus of this chapter, although the exact form taken by it differed based upon their unique figurational trajectories. In the previous section, we observed how group charisma continued to be invoked by Durham-based White English hackneys, who belonged to a formerly established group in decline. Those ‘exemplary’ members of this group who had enhanced its reputation in years past – including notably the miners who not only materially improved their families’ fortunes but also held the prestige of being high-skilled manual workers – continued to shape the self-image of members today (Elias and Scotson, 1994, p. xix). There were also some instances where group

disgrace was alluded to, and in some cases directly mobilised, in relation to those marked as outsiders/newcomers: Asian hackneys who don't reside in Durham and supposedly only drive in on weekends; Newcastle-plated Uber drivers, who were perceived to be mostly immigrants; and other ethnic minority<sup>131</sup> hackney carriage drivers.

Since data on this side of the equation is limited, I have chosen to not delve into these accounts in detail; however, a few salient observations are as follows. In one of our engagements, Darlene claimed that 'it's usually the foreigners' who overcharge customers or 'cherry pick' [i.e., refuse] fares at the rank – an impression that seemed to be reinforced by both her interactions with White English hackneys as well as what she, and presumably other drivers, were repeatedly told by predominantly White English customers<sup>132</sup>. Not all of these participants, however, inclined towards believing the group stigmatisation involved, with some recognising that it is, indeed, stigmatisation – albeit one that is easier to tolerate than to question when it does arise. In one of our engagements, David told me that he'd heard remarks like 'oh thank God you're White!' by customers entering his vehicle at the rank, and when asked why, they would recall being 'massively overcharged by some Asian guy'. He took this with a pinch of salt, for he knew that '*the one that would stick to the head would be the Asian guy*'. And he also knew that flows of alcohol play a role in charging, and letting out the overt expression of, such racism<sup>133</sup>. His overall view on figurational tensions permeating the Durham taxicab trade was that while group disgrace attached to Asians and other outsiders/newcomers was still very much in circulation, 'a lot of bad feeling towards Asians [in the hackney trade] has now been replaced by Uber drivers'.

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<sup>131</sup> Polish, Romanians, Arabs were among some of the other ethnic groups identified by Durham hackney carriage participants.

<sup>132</sup> One such customer, it was narrated, made a scene at the taxi rank by refusing to get in with an Asian driver, asserting that he's 'not funding the terrorists'. This trope was echoed somewhat by Alistair when he expressed concern about some drivers transferring money abroad.

<sup>133</sup> David said that such instances would often begin with 'drunk people going around the rank', asking to go with him instead of the non-white driver in front, and then 'starting to talk in a racist way and expecting me to go along with it'.

David's observations provide a good opening to begin discussing the figurational trajectory of the other communal group I encountered in my fieldwork: British Asians born and raised in the West End of Newcastle, also from a working class background. In contrast to White English participants in Durham, these participants belonged to a formerly outsider, now partly established group in terms of both length of residence and their accumulation of material resources<sup>134</sup> on a local scale, but were still haunted by the travails of their past outsider status. This made for a particularly interesting figurational constellation whereby both [present-day] group charisma and [carry-on] group disgrace were discernible in relation to themselves, while [present-day] group disgrace was directed towards those marked as outsiders/newcomers. Over the remainder of this section, I examine a selection of their accounts relating to the latter two of these, connecting my observations to the temporal evolution of the figurational positioning of their group, starting from the late 1970s, when they were schoolchildren, up until the present.

After David, the long-term participant with whom I spent the most time during my fieldwork was Newcastle hackney carriage driver Ali. During our first engagement, which lasted over three hours, he gave me a lengthy account of work trajectories in his local British Asian community, much of which corresponded to the transition from employment in textile mills to a cyclical, non-linear pattern of working in takeaways and taxis traced by Virinder Kalra in his ethnography of British Pakistani men in Oldham (Kalra, 2000, p. 158). A broadly similar account was later given by Osman, the second of two long-term British Asian participants whose accounts I draw on in this section. Ali characterised the 'first generation' of Asian migrants as those who came to Britain between the 1950s and late 1970s, and like a large section of British Pakistanis today, traced his own heritage to the town of Mirpur in [Azad] Kashmir. Historically, these Asians formed part of a larger wave of post-war labour migration from the 'third world' to Western

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<sup>134</sup> This encompasses their ownership of businesses [restaurants, cafés, takeaways] and housing on a local scale, as well as their now significant representation in Newcastle's hackney carriage trade.

Europe, which had swelled to 7.5 million by the 1970s (Potts, 1990, cited in Hobsbawm, 1994, p. 277). Specifically among the Mirpuris, who at first mainly comprised working-age men, many took up work in the waning textile industry of Britain, giving it a productivity lifeline through segregated work on night shifts (Kalra, 2000, pp. 90-91). Kalra aptly referred to this first generation of Mirpuri/Pakistani migrants as the *babas* ['old men' in Urdu/Hindi], and their British-born children as the *kakas* ['babies'] – a typology that I re-deploy in this chapter. Some of the *kakas* began their working lives by joining the *babas* in the mills; however, deindustrialization soon followed<sup>135</sup>, and this set in motion a transition<sup>136</sup> to working in Asian-owned takeaways and the taxicab trade, moving back and forth according to the circumstances. Ali himself became a taxi driver at the age of 19, just after he finished college<sup>137</sup> in 1989. The entry of *kakas* like himself into the taxicab trade formed part of an important turning point in a longer process of the 'ethnic diversification of the working-class', which was already underway at the time of the arrival of the *babas* (Hobsbawm, 1994). Whereas the latter, like many of the early post-war migrants to Western Europe, had found work in relatively segregated niches or grades of industry [e.g., night shifts in textile mills], the fallout of deindustrialization led the British-born *kakas* to enter an occupational space [taxicab driving] in the service sector towards which members of White English working class communities had also been driven, thus putting the two groups in direct competition with each other (pp. 309-10).

The story of *kakas* I met during my fieldwork may be approached in terms of certain key phases in the evolution of their communal group's figurational positioning, as can be gleaned from their accounts. The first of these was a formative experience whose affective traces are still very

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<sup>135</sup> There is a certain similarity between the predicaments faced by the *babas* and the miners in Durham in the wake of deindustrialization: both were pushed towards mass unemployment and rising welfare dependency.

<sup>136</sup> '...it would not be too difficult to forget that the mass of South Asians came to Britain to work in her declining manufacturing industries. Any move into self-employment by South Asians can therefore be usefully seen *in the light of the historical transformations in the economy of Britain*' (Kalra, 2000, pp. 1-2; emphasis added).

<sup>137</sup> The term should be read in line with its meaning in the UK.



much alive: racist abuse they faced in their school years during the 1970s and early 1980s. Compared to today, this was a time when their Asian community in the West End formed a much weaker outsider/newcomer group vis-à-vis White English residents, who both formed the vast majority of residents and commanded a greater share of material-symbolic resources. Both Ali and Osman narrated that at this time, the invective ‘paki’ – a mark of group disgrace attached to Asian communities of various backgrounds – was at the height of its potency, driven in part by the then-formidable political sway of far-right organisations like the British National Party [BNP] and the National Front<sup>138</sup>. The extract below provides some insight into Ali’s experience as a child attending school through this period:

“But you know what it is, I won’t stand for it [racist abuse from passengers]. I’ll fight. ‘Get out!’ And simply because all through school [in the eighties], like Kumar Jee said when we were at the takeaway<sup>139</sup>, *all through school we were bullied for being Asian*. You know whether you were Hindu, Sikh, Pakistani, or Bengali, you were called a paki, *they didn’t distinguish between anybody*. It was just oh he’s a paki or a blackie or a doggie, whichever derogatory term they could think of, they would spew it out...[ ]...The National Front would take out marches on the streets, chanting ‘Pakis Out!’. Some would go right past our house.”

– Ali, Newcastle hackney carriage driver, in-person interview, 12 November 2022

The searing pain of the racist bullying faced by second-generation British Asians like Ali in their school years, which can be sensed in his account above, resonates with Elias and Scotson’s observation that group disgrace directed towards members of outsider/newcomer groups has ‘its sting’ (Elias and Scotson, 2002, p. 104) – one that can live on in affective terms *beyond* any

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<sup>138</sup> It was also a time in which, as Osman told me, seeing oneself as one of the ‘coloureds’ held meaning.

<sup>139</sup> Kumar Jee was a British Indian, Hindu corner shop owner who walked into the takeaway in Gateshead during one of my engagements with Ali. Over the course of four visits to this site, I met and had quick conversations with several members of the West End Asian community who frequented this establishment, including its owners – two brothers who also hailed from Mirpur, and had previously done stints as taxicab drivers in both Newcastle and Durham.

advances in their relative status. Ali, now a middle-aged man above 50 years old, gave this account in a quavering-yet-angry voice, and for most of it was looking down to the floor, unable to maintain eye contact. In a subsequent engagement, he remarked that his school years ‘may have been the toughest period’ of his life, and linked this collective experience of verbal and sometimes physical assault [‘paki-bashing’] to a divergence in the attitudes of the first and second generations of British Asians towards racism: whereas the former, including his mum and dad, would ‘look down’, ‘keep quiet’ and ‘take it’ – a disposition motivated in part by the desire to stem instances of their youngsters behaving in a manner that would ‘live out’ the bad image imparted to their group (Stanley, 2017, para. 5.5) – the latter became defiant over their teenage years, deciding that they must ‘fight fire with fire’. This defiance<sup>140</sup> seems to have persisted as they progressed into adulthood, and forms the basis of Ali’s zero tolerance as a taxi driver towards any form of racist abuse hurled by White English customers, however implicit this may be. One can rightly admire this defiance, while acceding at the same time that it is indicative of the living wounds of the school years – wounds that are easily inflamed, as was the case in my conversations on this period with both *kakas* [Ali and Osman] that I met during my fieldwork.

The second phase that is important for understanding Newcastle-born *kakas*’ figurational trajectory spans from the late 1980s to the end of the 1990s, during which they increasingly gained a foothold in the city’s hackney carriage trade. Many of them, like Ali and Osman, went on to become organisers, leading associations comprised of both White English and Asian drivers. Osman narrated that over the course of this period, a number of *kakas* began to own small businesses like off-license ‘corner shops’, Asian supermarkets, restaurants and takeaways; progressed from working as takeaway employees, bus conductors and PHV drivers towards holding coveted hackney carriage licenses; married and started raising families with either

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<sup>140</sup> I would direct the reader towards the Channel 4 documentary of the same name: ‘Defiance: Fighting the Far Right’. Parts of the story depicted in this production strongly resonate with both Kalra’s (2000) account as well as what I was told by my second-generation British Asian participants.

*mangetars* [‘fiancés’/in-laws] invited from the Indian subcontinent or British Asian women from within their community; and benefitted from ‘strength in numbers’ as they gradually moved towards forming a larger proportion of residents in their neighbourhoods in the West End<sup>141</sup>. All this may be said to have contributed to the degree of internal cohesion and accumulation of material resources on a local scale.

However, while such changes are indicative of figurational ascent, this improvement in material terms must not be confused with the attainment of an established positioning, which cannot be deciphered from Ali and Osman’s accounts of this period. White English drivers still formed the overall majority in the hackney carriage trade, and symbolic resources – including notably the ability to repel and effectively retaliate against slurs cast on their communal group [e.g., ‘paki’, ‘coloureds’], which would have gone hand in hand with an attenuation of their ‘sting’ (Elias and Scotson, 1994, p. 162) – were still very much lacking. Whilst the former has now changed, the latter asymmetry, whilst moderated to some degree, was still discernible in these participants’ accounts. Some of the intricacies underlying these processes can be gleaned from the following account given by Osman of his 35-year long career in the city’s hackney carriage trade:

“When I first joined the trade [in 1988], most of the English drivers were sixty, seventy years old. When they saw someone like us, they’d spit at us. ‘Where’s he fucking come from!?’...[ ]...Young English drivers, they mixed and mingled...[ ]...In the nineties we had a lot more Asians coming into the trade, but there was still a good mix of Asian and English drivers. We had associations that worked together, we discussed things with the Council and the Council had to go our way. We had more educated, influential people. *So it was definitely better back then.* Now we’ve got so many people, nobody respects you anymore, not the Council, nor the police. English drivers leaving the

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<sup>141</sup> Data from the 1991 census, which first recorded ethnicity figures, was found to not specifically provide these figures on Nomis/ONS websites. However, according to data from the 2001 census, 4.38 percent of residents in Newcastle upon Tyne identified as Asian/Asian British. In the 2011 census, this had more than doubled to 9.7 percent. The rise slowed somewhat over the course of the next decade, with the most recent census in 2021 estimating the proportion of Asian residents in Newcastle at 11.4 percent (Nomis, 2024a; 2024b; 2024c).

trade also makes a difference. The Council [officials] are English, you see. *Jab loha loha katay* [equivalent idiom: when diamonds cut diamonds], then you figure something out.”

– Osman, Newcastle hackney carriage driver, in-person interview, 13 July 2023

Proceeding in a chronological manner, Osman’s account is firstly indicative of the figurational ascent of the *kakas* during the nineties, in which the strengthening of their position in Newcastle’s hackney carriage trade played a notable role. It relates to Ali charismatically describing his cohort of Asian drivers, who like him and Osman obtained their licenses at the end of the 1980s, as the ‘original pioneers’ of the now Asian-majority hackney carriage trade: those who ‘paved the way’ for others in their community to benefit from the financial security as well as the prestige – in terms of the *industrial* order of worth – that it endowed.

At the same time, however, it is revealing of the ambivalence that continues to afflict these second-generation British Asians regarding their self-worth in human, ‘by nature’ terms (Stanley, 2017): will they forever remain beneath becoming ‘diamonds’ themselves? We are reminded here of Elias and Scotson’s (1994) observation that the collective, human inferiority attached to members of outsider/newcomer groups ‘*cannot be easily shaken off*’ (p. 103; emphasis added). Osman’s seeing the decline in numbers of White English hackneys – the corollary to which has been an increase in the numbers of Asians – as contributing to the trade’s now-weakened negotiating position with the Council is just one illustration of this; despite the relatively more hostile environment faced by Asians during this period<sup>142</sup>, which he had personally experienced, his overall view remained that the state of the trade was ‘definitely better’ back then. His implicit attribution of superior worth [‘more educated, influential’; ‘diamonds’] to English drivers relates to an insightful comment by veteran Newcastle hackney participant Dan, who hinted at the

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<sup>142</sup> It ought to be remembered that just like in the *kakas*’ school years, verbal insults directed at Asians sometimes tipped over into physical violence: the nineties saw an arson attack on a Newcastle mosque, and then the murder of Khoaz Aziz Miah, who was beaten to death by a gang whilst on his way to the mosque (Lawrence, 1999; Kelly, 2014).

ingrained, deep-seated nature of the established-outsider ‘we-images’ at play as he quipped that back in the eighties and nineties, when Asians first appeared in the trade, ‘*normally they would associate with us first*’.

Bearing these observations in mind, let us proceed to the final, third phase of the *kakas*’ figurational trajectory, which pertains to the 21<sup>st</sup> century and encompasses, in relation to the subject matter of this thesis, the deregulation and platformisation of the taxicab trade. Osman drew a line to this phase when he spoke about there being ‘so many people’ in the taxicab trade; the rest of our conversation made clear that he meant both ‘so many [newer, non-British] Asians’ as well as ‘so many PHV drivers [of various racial and ethnic backgrounds]’. We will shortly see that those deemed to constitute both these groups were disparaged as outsiders/newcomers. Ethnographic data drew attention to two noteworthy developments that took place during this recent phase: a potent, still-ongoing rearticulation of group disgrace directed at *all* Asians that was stirred up in the aftermath of the grooming gangs scandal, an extended event going back to the early 2000s that has periodically intensified, and consequently congealed, scrutiny of Asian men as possible child sexual abusers targeting underage white girls (Swanton, 2010a, p. 462); and rising numbers of *mangetars*, first-generation migrant Asians with no ties to the West End, and other outsiders/newcomers of various racial and ethnic backgrounds coming into the taxicab trade, with this leading to an intriguing current of group disgrace mobilised by the older, second-generation British Asians against these groups.

Also extending to Newcastle<sup>143</sup>, the grooming gangs scandal was particularly hurtful for Ali and Osman. A clear-cut case of the ‘minority of the worst’ tainting the perception, and to some extent the self-image, of the entirety of their communal group (Elias and Scotson, 1994), the stigmatisation tied to this scandal was reminiscent – in a very visceral way – of their former

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<sup>143</sup> Starting in 2013, Northumbria Police conducted Operation Sanctuary to investigate claims of sexual abuse against girls and young women in the West End of Newcastle. 18 people, mostly Asian men, were convicted in 2017 as a result (see *BBC News*, 2017).

outsider status: their traumatic school years, and all the caustic, overt racist abuse they had suffered in their careers as taxicab drivers, but which they had hoped was becoming a thing of the past. I came to know of it through my discussions with participants about an issue that they began to raise in the latter half of my fieldwork: Newcastle City Council's imposition of a new rule that all black cabs [hackney carriages] in the city must have a white coating on their bonnets, with a key reason cited for this being 'safeguarding' of the public, especially lone women (Holland, 2023). The majority Asian drivers objected to this as they feared the black and white colours of Newcastle United FC would mark them out as targets for racially motivated verbal and physical abuse by supporters of opposing teams, who they knew are predominantly White. Despite organising against the rule, they were unable to stop it, and it came into force while my fieldwork was still underway.

Both Ali and Osman, who played a leading role on the organising front, thought this was ludicrous as the foremost safeguarding issue was deregulation and its opening of 'floodgates' in the PHV sector, not the colour of the city's hackney carriages, which had been black for over three decades. Interestingly, Ali's reflections also pointed towards a perception – unable to be articulated as part of organising against the rule – that the Council's invocation of 'safeguarding' as a justification had something to do with the fact that the trade was now majority Asian. This was an association he could draw after witnessing, over the course of the past decade, that a potent, overtly-hostile kind of group disgrace attached to *all* Asians had reared its head again in the wake of the grooming gangs scandal:

"Part of this safeguarding issue [in the taxicab trade] goes back to Operation Sanctuary. The grooming gangs scandal. There were grooming gangs in Rochdale, in Sheffield, Rotherham, Leeds-Bradford, and some here in Newcastle. And sadly, many Asians, Asian private hires, *were* involved. It's true...[ ]...But the thing is, what happens when an English or a British man engages in the same sort of behaviour. For example have you heard of Jimmy Saville? Jimmy Saville was a presenter.

When he did something like that, was his race mentioned? Was his ethnicity mentioned? *No? Why? So why is it that it's only mentioned when some Asians would do it*<sup>144</sup>? If that isn't racism, then what is it? We're supposed to be living in a democratic country with equal opportunities. *Asians in this country will always be second-class citizens. They will never be first-class.*"

– Ali, Newcastle hackney carriage driver, in-person interview, 20 October 2022

In the extract above, Ali connects the resurgence of group disgrace following the grooming gangs scandal – one whereby sexual innuendo [e.g., ‘predators’, ‘paedophiles’] began to be attached to the bodies of Asian drivers as well as the cabs they drive (Swanton, 2010a, p. 455) – to longstanding Asian-White figurational asymmetries in communities across the country, and the embodiment of these in local and national politics and the media. Curiously, however, this was only part of his view on the matter. The remainder of our discussion revealed that the ‘sting’ of group disgrace stirred up by this scandal was also tied to the strengthening of an ‘old-new distinction’ (Stanley, 2017, para. 3.3) – one whereby both first-generation Asian migrants with no ties to the West End British Asian community, as well as recent *mangetars* [also first-generation migrants] who marry into it, are cast as outsiders/newcomers. The latter group faces a particularly interesting delineation of boundaries that operates *within* the older, now partly-established British Asian community: one whereby they become relatives of members of that community, thus effectively forming part of it, yet are denied ‘full membership’ of it by the older residents they

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<sup>144</sup> Ali later expanded on this cross-comparison of Asian sexual offenders and Jimmy Saville by claiming that whenever it is groups of white men involved, they are labelled as ‘rings’, whereas the label ‘grooming gangs’ tends to be reserved for Asians.

come to live with, at least until a certain ‘probationary period’ (Elias and Scotson, 1994, p. 17) has passed<sup>145</sup>.

Whilst the ‘old-new distinction’ referred to above had little impact in weakening the implication of all Asian or British Pakistani men in the wake of the grooming gangs scandal, it allowed for the redirection of blame and humiliation toward ‘newer’ Asians, who were seen as being not sufficiently integrated into, and subject to group-specific norms observed by, the older British Asian community. Ali enacted this distinction in the preceding extract when he specified that ‘Asian *private hires*’ were involved in the grooming gangs scandal; the PHV trade is where the majority of recent *mangetars*, and other first-generation Asian migrants, are believed to start their careers as taxicab drivers<sup>146</sup>. Later on in the same conversation, he blamed members of these two sub-groups of Asians for ‘peddling drugs’ [recent Asian migrants] and, in connection to the earlier accusation, for holding ‘culturally incompatible’ views on women and sexuality [both recent Asian migrants and the *mangetars*], which he feared made them susceptible to engaging in the sort of behaviour that would provide yet more pretexts for inflicting group disgrace upon all Asians, including the older British Asian community. In his own words: ‘I can see where this is going; it will lead to a lot of race hate issues’. Once again, just like with any other outsider/newcomer group, the ‘optical illusion’ (Stanley, 2017) of the ‘minority of the worst’ (Elias and Scotson, 1994) was at play: only some evidence of Asian PHV drivers’ involvement in drug

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<sup>145</sup> My one-time engagement with British Asian hackney participant Sajjad, who had originally arrived as a *mangetar* in the early 1990s, drew attention towards an interesting process of differentiation that forms part of this boundary-work: one whereby older *mangetars* who had passed through the ‘probationary period’ and been ‘inducted’ into the British Asian community would later distance themselves from, and take aim at, more recent *mangetars*. In this sense it may be said that within the West End communal group the term *mangetar* sometimes operated as a sort of a slur – one which entrants to the community sought to shake off over time, in turn wielding it against those who arrived later.

<sup>146</sup> In many cases, however, they move into the hackney carriage trade over time – thus replicating the transition first made by the British Asian *kakas* towards the end of the 1980s. However the conventional wisdom still seems to be that the hackney trade is where the ‘older’ Asians are concentrated, with ‘newer’ ones taking up work as PHV drivers.



dealing or sexual offenses was needed to characterise the entirety of ‘newer’ Asians as problematic per se – in this as well as a number of other ways<sup>147</sup>.

The mobilisation of group disgrace on part of second-generation British Asians was not just limited to ‘newer’ Asians, including recent *mangetars*. It also encompassed various other outsider/newcomer groups who had moved into their local neighbourhoods over recent years: Polish, Romanian, Somalian, Kurdish, Iraqi, Afghan and other immigrants, as well as ‘asylum seekers’ of various backgrounds. Just like the newer Asians, antipathy towards members of these groups was linked to the belief that many of them now work in the PHV sector. This belief set the stage for a dangerous distortion whereby PHV drivers who do not in fact reside in the West End could *also* be read as being members of the outsider/newcomer groups present in the locality, for instance a Black PHV driver seen as being among the Somalians who do reside there.

Irrespective of which outsider/newcomer group they belonged to, PHV drivers who had entered the trade in recent years – and in particular those who worked on the Uber platform – were perceived by the British Asian *kakas* as having benefitted from a particularly lax licensing regime. This perception was coupled with an assertion of group charisma on their part: not only had they obtained their licenses after meeting stringent requirements like the Locality Test, which meant that they represented ‘professionalism’ and ‘higher standards’ of driving in the taxicab trade, they did so during a period marked by a more potent, overtly hostile form of group disgrace aimed at their communal group. Had they not fought ‘fire with fire’, and attained a dominant position in the coveted hackney carriage trade, their communal group would still be vulnerable to that hostility: it is *their* perseverance and accumulation of material resources that led to an

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<sup>147</sup> Further accusations made by British Asian participants against recent *mangetars* included ‘staying quiet about’ and ‘not having the confidence’ to call out racist abuse by white passengers, thus giving them the impression that they can do it to any Asian driver, as well as ‘working too much’ and not ‘going out’ enough with their British Asian spouses, sometimes leading to the breakdown of marriage. As for other first-generation Asian migrants working as PHV drivers, they were deemed to be poor, unqualified drivers who were beneficiaries of deregulation gone awry, in much the same way as other PHV drivers of a different race or ethnicity.

improved figurational positioning for both their children as well as later Asian migrants. In this manner, their qualification of themselves as worthy beings in terms of virtues from the *industrial* world [e.g., *professional qualifications* like the Locality Test], and the assertion of righteousness that went with it, interacted with a status distinction – vis-à-vis outsiders/newcomers – in human, ‘by nature’ terms (Stanley, 2017).

This distinction involved a complementary relationship between assertions of group charisma, as discussed above, and the levelling of group disgrace. Recorded instances of poor driving by some PHV drivers routinely spread like wildfire on taxi driver forums, reinforcing the view that the present-day cohort of PHV drivers – believed to comprise mostly first-generation migrants working for Uber and Bolt – is responsible for an egregious decline in standards. Somewhat akin to the assertion of group charisma mentioned above, here too critiques defending an *industrial* ordering of the taxicab trade came to interact with the casting of slurs that is characteristic of the attachment of group disgrace, as illustrated by the extract below, some aspects of which I will take up for analysis in the following section:

“These private hire drivers from the subcontinent and other places, they would have never got their licenses if it wasn’t for the scrapping of the Locality Test...[ ]...*I would like these foreigners and immigrants to respect this country’s laws.* They don’t respect the highway code, you know if they have a customer waiting in a yellow box junction they’ll stop right in the middle of it...[ ]...[\*sees a Black PHV driver trying to reverse into a bay, unable to get it right the first time\*] *Ye dekhein! Janglis!* [Just look at this! Wild animals!...] [ ]...Now that would be his fourth attempt.”

– Osman, Newcastle hackney carriage driver, in-person interview, 13 July 2023

In sum, then, the analysis undertaken in this section has demonstrated that attributions of unworthiness to PHV drivers from the standpoint of the *industrial* world, as examined earlier in the thesis, were overlaid with boundary work and distinctions of worth in human, ‘by nature’ terms (Stanley, 2017) tied to established-outsider relations, and vice versa. Just like the White

English in Durham, the delineation of these boundaries by the Newcastle-born *kakas* was often based on collective memories of experiences that *their* communal group had gone through during their lifetimes: the racist bullying and ‘paki-bashing’ they faced during their school years, and the defiant attitude it had fostered in them; and the ‘pioneering’ inroads they made into Newcastle’s hackney carriage trade over the course of the nineties. All these experiences had been instrumental in the development of their *own* set of ‘feeling rules’ (Hochschild, 2016). Since PHV drivers belonging to various outsider/newcomer groups had not shared in them, they could not ‘belong’: this was as much a reason for their vilification as their lack of qualification as worthy beings in terms of the *industrial* order of worth.

### ***Racialisation: A Propellant, or Inflection of Group Disgrace?***

In light of all that we have discussed so far, let us now consider the following contention by Elias regarding how racial or ethnic differences figure in established-outsider relations:

“What one calls “race relations”, in other words, are simply established—outsider relationships of a particular type. The fact that members of the two groups differ in their physical appearance...merely serves as a reinforcing shibboleth which makes members of an outsider group more easily recognisable as such. Nor is the designation “racial prejudice” particularly apt. The aversion, contempt or hatred felt by members of an established group for those of an outsider group, and the fear that closer contact with the latter may pollute them, are *no different in cases where the two groups differ distinctly in their physical appearance and in others where they are physically indistinguishable*...It seems that terms like “racial” or “ethnic”, widely used in this context both in sociology and in society at large, are symptomatic of an ideological avoidance action. By using them, one singles out for attention what is peripheral to these relationships (e.g. differences of skin colour) and turns the eye away from what is central (e.g. differences in power ratio and the exclusion of a power-inferior group from positions with a higher power potential).”

– Elias and Scotson (1994, p. xxx; emphasis added)

The essence of this argument lies in its underlining of *power ratios* – measured in terms of the ‘relative degrees to which a group...constrains another independent group...and *vice versa*’ (Dunning and Hughes, 2023, p. 80; emphasis in original). Since such constraints are reciprocal in nature, they entail means of restriction and enablement/support at the same time (Quintaneiro, 2004; Dunning and Hughes, 2023). As an example, the White English may depend on the Asians for taxis at night, but Asians may depend on White English recruiters for accessing the formal job market, thus amounting to a higher quotient of constraint/enablement for the Asians, and a lower power ratio. Elias added to this point on power ratios with a further assertion that the foregrounding of racial or ethnic differences is also likely to result in losing sight of long-term, multi-generational group processes, whereby groups of individuals, with or without such differences, come into contact and then engage in balance-of-power struggles that evolve over time (Elias and Scotson, 1994, p. xlvii).

It is worth placing the entirety of this argument in conversation with what was encountered in the course of this ethnographic study. Based on the accounts reviewed in the previous section, can we say that group disgrace directed towards members of outsider groups was ‘no different’ when the figuration in question was characterised by differences of race and ethnicity? Were race and ethnicity mere ‘shibboleths’, inflections, or *post factum* explanations (Stanley, 2017) of group disgrace, or did they *do* something more than this, short of determining it entirely? As I reach the point in my writing where I begin addressing these questions, it is 7 August 2024, and the UK is engulfed in serious public disorder and rioting in the wake of the tragic killing of three girls in Southport, Merseyside. Following false suspicions that the assailant was a Muslim asylum seeker who came to Britain by small boat, a number of the events in question have involved instances of an indiscriminate form of hatred, abuse and violence towards people of colour and migrants, equivocated with ‘illegal migrants’ [asylum seekers], ‘Muslims’, ‘[Asian] sexual abusers’, etc. in a manner that reminds one of Sara Ahmed’s notion of ‘sliding’ between

figures in which hate is concentrated (Ahmed, 2004, pp. 44-48). Some, like a video of a woman in Belfast and her young daughter chanting ‘Pakis Out!’, and graffiti left on the walls of a hotel in Rotherham [‘Fuck Pakis’] which insurgents attempted to set alight, point towards a sudden recharging of the potency of this decades-old slur, which was clearly absent when I was undertaking my fieldwork. In any case, however, my view is that the rapid onset of these events has made a consideration of the questions posed above even more pertinent.

In the previous section, we examined data pertaining to three distinct variations of group disgrace: that which was alluded to, and in some cases reaffirmed, by White English drivers in Durham in relation to outsiders who were almost always of a different racial or ethnic background [e.g., Asian hackneys]; that which continues to implicate second-generation British Asian drivers in Newcastle, as a byproduct of its attachment to all Asians by the White English; and that mobilised by these British Asians themselves against various non-white outsider groups, including, quite interestingly, recent Asian migrants. All three variations involved established-outsider figurations that were segmented along racial and ethnic lines, although the third sometimes involved the same ethnicity [Asians] on both sides, and in all cases did not involve the white/non-white opposition that often appears – for good reason – in theoretical and empirical inquiries into matters of race and ethnicity. The forthcoming discussion focuses upon the latter two variations, both of which were discerned in my engagements with British Asian participants. Taken together, they provide a localised yet variegated resource to consider the intricacies of the manner in which racial or ethnic differences come to be *enrolled* in figurational conflict, paving the way for engaging with the questions posed above.

The first step in doing so is to revisit how these differences are being framed in this thesis. In the theoretical overview [Part III] earlier, I outlined my relational conceptualisation of race, developed through engagement with a body of work in human geography which has sought to move beyond the prevailing epistemological opposition between race as a biological versus a social

construct (Alcoff, 2006; Saldanha, 2006; Amin, 2007). Instead, as Swanton proposes, social scientific inquiries ought to interrogate its workings as a ‘technology of differentiation’ that is ‘variously and creatively enrolled in moments of encounter to locate and sort, but also to judge, human difference’ (Swanton, 2010a, p. 463; Sheth, 2004). This is a conceptualisation whose ontological positioning is aligned with the tenets of assemblage thinking (Deleuze and Guattari, 1988) – in particular the idea that an assemblage of relations in any given context involves a co-articulation of *both* expressive and material attributes (Buchanan, 2021, pp. 32-35). With respect to race, the former dimension captures the work done by discourses, narratives and images [e.g., recurring newspaper headlines on ‘Asian grooming gangs’] in effecting the ‘incorporeal transformations’ (Deleuze and Guattari, 1988, p. 89) through which certain populations are discursively cast or ‘signified’ in racial terms (Butler, 1993, p. 30), as well as how these are modulated by biopolitical regimes such as ‘race science’; legacies of colonialism; school curriculums; laws and policies governing immigration and citizenship; securitization of Muslims; and so forth (Swanton, 2010a, p. 462, 467). And the latter encompasses the active, *machinic* materiality (Deleuze and Guattari, 1988; Buchanan, 1997; Amin and Thrift, 2002a; 2002b) of bodies, inclusive of phenotypical differences like those of skin colour, as well as things and spaces: in the context of this study, these include taxicabs, their license plates [with colour and design differing based on PHV/hackney and licensing authority], taxi ranks, pick-up and drop-off bays for both hackney carriages and PHVs, takeaways, particular areas in Newcastle read as being ‘Asian’ or ‘White’, just to mention a few.

In examining race as a technology of differentiation (Swanton, 2010a), the analytical focus centres neither on how either of the two aforementioned dimensions act in isolation, nor how one regulates the other, but rather how heterogeneous elements from both of them become enrolled in the sorting of human difference in a manner that is contingent upon, and *immanent* to, each individual moment of encounter. Pursuant to this, racialisation is understood as the process

through which such momentary, *in situ* fixings of race, drawing together and implicating different bodies, things and spaces, accumulate from one encounter to the next. Here, it should be recalled that while race articulates differently in each such encounter, recurring associations among some expressive and material elements lead to certain affective responses and perceptual practices (Alcoff, 2006) becoming sedimented in virtual memory, acquiring the character of latencies that always remain prone to actualising (Swanton, 2010a). Yet a degree of indeterminacy remains: the eventfulness of encounter means that they recombine with – and *charge* – different bodies, things and spaces in different ways (Saldanha, 2006, p. 12; Swanton, 2010a). Swanton's (2010a) empirical analysis of how suspicions and sexual innuendo attached to Asian men 'ride on' and 'stick to' the taxicabs they drive (pp. 455-56) exemplifies this productive tension between the potentiality of encounters (Thrift, 2000; Massumi, 2002) and the weight of sedimented memories and perceptual practices (Fanon, 1986; Alcoff, 1999; 2006) particularly well, given the focus of this study. In sum, then, racialisation is both polyvalent, *and* constrained by the historicity of its movements.

Let us now dissect how race as a technology of differentiation figured within two different variations of group disgrace observed in this study, and what that tells us about the questions raised regarding Elias' argument quoted above. The first of these – the carry-on group disgrace that British Asian *kakas* like Ali and Osman felt continued to implicate them – was operant in a figuration where established-outsider group boundaries were drawn, in a manner one could not miss, along white/non-white racial lines. This was a *multi-scalar* figuration, present both locally in the West End and in multiple other places across the country. Ali's statement where he cited the example of Jimmy Saville in contesting the racial differentiation of sexual offenses, and lamented that 'Asians in this country will always be second-class citizens', spoke to both the fuzzy, mobile stigmatisation of Asian men like him that he had been able to discern on a local scale, including during the white bonnet controversy, and the national media's portrayal of Asian

offenders in places elsewhere in the country, which was seen to reinforce suspicions that *any* Asian man might engage in such behaviour.

The ‘stickiness’ of sexual innuendo attached to Asian men in Britain, as observed in both this project and Swanton’s (2010a) inquiry, may be attributed – in the first instance – to the attachment of collective disgrace to an outsider group, enabled by continued disparities in power ratio vis-à-vis the established. However, in cases where one observes a not-so-insignificant overlap between outsider groups with an inferior power ratio, and there being racial or ethnic differences between them and the established group, it becomes incumbent to also consider the workings of race as a technology of differentiation: how it becomes enveloped within, gives force to, and perpetuates, such peculiar forms of group disgrace as those tied to the grooming gangs scandal – on both an expressive *and* material level. It is the capriciousness of *raced suspicions* [Asian = potential groomer], being enrolled over and over again and at the same time rearticulating themselves in multiple localised encounters, that leads to certain kinds of vehicles<sup>148</sup> – taxicabs driven by Asians – *also* being racialised (Swanton, 2010a). The *machinic* materiality of mobile and publicly visible taxis – and as we shall see shortly, PHVs – gives a push to these suspicions, transmuting them from incipient intensities present in virtual memory into rapid judgements rendered ‘on the move’ (p. 448). Osman had first-hand experience of this. A few years ago when the grooming gangs scandal was in the media spotlight, he was stopped by Northumbria Police officers just before he reached his home in the West End, despite his insurance, MOT, tax, and hackney carriage driver and vehicle licenses all being in order. ‘Why have you stopped me!?', he indignantly asked the officers, before deciding to just drive past them to his house a short distance away. The officers followed him, but once he had parked on his driveway and begun screaming ‘get off my property!’, they decided to leave. A formal complaint was lodged with the

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<sup>148</sup> Swanton (2010a) gives further examples, such as pimped rides and BMWs driven by Asian youth being associated with suspicions of drug dealing.



police force, and a letter of apology was later received in the mail. The entire episode vividly illustrates that race as a technology of differentiation was at work: without it, one could not account for why the police had profiled him in the first place, and why he immediately recognised it as such.

The affectively disorientating ‘sting’ (Elias and Scotson, 1994) of raced suspicions tied to the grooming gangs scandal, as embodied in Osman’s anger above, was just one manifestation of the lower power ratio of Newcastle-born British Asians vis-à-vis the White English, despite improvements in their figural positioning over the course of their lifetimes. The protracted, heteromorphic stigmatisation experienced by members of this group exemplifies how the casting of slurs during a time of a highly uneven balance of power may outlive, for a period of time, a narrowing of power differentials in material terms<sup>149</sup> (Elias and Scotson, 1994, p. xxv). And in a broader sense, it illustrates how the figuration they found themselves in, like many others, developed by way of opposing tendencies: accumulation of material resources here, continued status disparities there (Dunning and Hughes, 2023, p. 85; Quintaneiro, 2004).

With respect to the latter point, it is important to remember that disparities in material power resources had by no means disappeared. All British Asian participants expressed their dismay that a large section of the next generation – that of their children – still tended to take up work in the taxi and takeaway sectors, instead of pursuing further education and entering the formal job market. I remember how Newcastle hackney participant Sajjad’s eyes beamed as he told me that after repeated warnings and a continual emphasis on educational outcomes on his

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<sup>149</sup> This may in part be owed to the outsiders attaining a position in terms of accumulation of material power resources where they begin to actively contest – however ineffectively – the degrading slurs cast upon them; the defiant attitude of Ali and Osman towards any form of racial abuse provides a case in point. Addressing this kind of shift in figural conflicts, Elias notes: ‘...the supremacy of the economic aspects of established-outsider conflicts is most pronounced where the balance of power between the contenders is most uneven—is tilted most strongly in favour of the established group. *The less that is the case, the more clearly recognisable become other non-economic aspects of the tensions and conflicts*’ (Elias and Scotson, 1994, p. xxxii; emphasis added).

part, his kids had 'broken the cycle'; one of them was now attending university in London. The desirability of such a trajectory, however, needs to be counterposed with a perception shared among these participants that Asians could still face racial discrimination in the job market – in both the private and public sectors. In our first engagement, and then twice afterwards, Ali accused officials at Newcastle City Council of discriminating against him when he interviewed for a position for which he maintained he was the 'most qualified' applicant – an encounter that had hardened his belief that 'an Asian has to work ten times as hard to get the same job'. He speculated that discrimination of this kind may have waned somewhat, but kept citing this encounter in underscoring to me that it exists – that Asians are excluded from 'positions with a higher power potential' (Elias and Scotson, 1994, p. xxx; Stanley, 2017) *because they are Asian*. This did not amount to a refusal to acknowledge that the same may be true for members of other racialised groups, but was rather an attempt to highlight its particularity.

As noted previously, the flipside of carry-on group disgrace faced by British Asian participants, and the ambivalence this engendered regarding their own self-worth in human, 'by nature' terms (Stanley, 2017), was another, present-day variation of group disgrace that they *themselves* mobilised against various outsider/newcomer groups. Although there were racial and ethnic differences between them and many of these groups, this was not always the case, since we also observed them directing prejudice towards other Asians. In the latter case, there was a delineation of established-outsider boundaries that went beyond mere phenotypical attributes or rudimentary conceptions of 'ethnicity': one based, in part, on differences in length of residence in the UK and the generational background of a particular Asian, which served as indicators of the extent of their belonging – or lack thereof – to the older, partly-established British Asian community. On first examination, this lends support to Elias' assertion that group disgrace is 'no different' when the established and outsiders differ in terms of race or ethnicity as compared to when they do not (Elias and Scotson, 1994, p. xxx). The stigmatisation of *mangetars* and other

‘newer’ Asians throws this into relief<sup>150</sup>, because even in the absence of such differences, group disgrace had a potency not too dissimilar to that mobilised, for example, by some White English participants against racialised outsiders in Durham.

However, upon closer examination, it becomes possible to discern that here, too, race as a technology of differentiation was at work. Racialised tropes of ‘cultural incompatibility’ and highly capricious forms of sexual innuendo whose ‘sting’ (Elias and Scotson, 1994) the British Asians felt first and foremost in relation to their own group, but which were in fact ‘raced suspicions’ (Swanton, 2010a) being attached to all Asians, were being *counter-enrolled* in the mobilisation of group disgrace against ‘newer’ Asians, thus reinforcing their position as the excluded outsiders<sup>151</sup>. Such disgrace was, in this sense, both ‘a weapon of defence [of group boundaries] as well as a weapon of attack’ (Elias and Scotson, 1994, p. 104). Even if one were to take the view that it did not involve those newer Asians being racialised, but was rather a response to feelings of shame and humiliation that the British Asians were faced with in the context of another figuration, it is clear that such a response – in this particular case – seemed to replicate the inventive, devious workings of the technology of race (Saldanha, 2006, p. 20; Swanton, 2010a). This tells us that in figurations where racial or ethnic differences are not explicitly present, but where the power-superior group is itself subject to racialisation by virtue of its former outsider status in a different figuration, group disgrace mobilised by members of that group may sometimes involve a *rearticulation* of the very racialisation that came to implicate them<sup>152</sup>. If such a rearticulation is

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<sup>150</sup> One Durham hackney participant’s mention of there being ‘concerns around girls’ with [white] Polish hackneys, and remembering times when he had heard the slur ‘paki’ being used against them, may be said to further substantiate the point made by Elias.

<sup>151</sup> There is some evidence to suggest that this exclusion may have been less impenetrable for the *mangetars*, some of whom – like Sajjad – have been able to transcend it over time. An Uber driver I spoke to after fieldwork had concluded described his own passage by saying about himself: ‘*ab pakke hogaye hain* [now we’ve become permanent]’. It is unclear, however, whether this can be attributed to a lack of racial or ethnic differences; it may also be owed to immediate family ties facilitating closer contact with members of the older, now partly-established group over time.

<sup>152</sup> Whether or not such a redirection of group disgrace – and the racialised suspicions enveloped within it – can be ‘made to stick’ (Elias and Scotson, 1994, p. xx) to more recent outsiders depends on the balance

found to be at play – as it was in this ethnographic study – then tracing the movements of race as a technology of differentiation *remains* invaluable in dissecting the nature and force of group disgrace.

That this conceptualisation can serve as a valuable heuristic device in figurational inquiries is demonstrated further when we consider how some raced suspicions redirected towards Asian PHV drivers were similar to those aimed directly at PHV drivers who were not Asian, but rather of different racial or ethnic backgrounds. Osman's snap judgement of a Black PHV driver who happened to appear during our engagement and failed to park his vehicle in one attempt, as seen in the previous section, provides a case in point. His infuriated response – 'wild animals!' – implicated *all* PHV drivers, irrespective of which outsider/newcomer group they are seen to belong to. Immediately prior to this moment, he had been denigrating 'foreigners and immigrants' working in the PHV sector – newer Asians and otherwise – for not observing 'this country's laws', and in particular the Highway Code. Such resentments appear eerily similar to those found by Swanton (2010a) in White English people he interviewed in Keighley, Yorkshire, except in that case they were being directed towards anyone sorted as 'Asian' – including, presumably, British-born Asians. Just as momentary fixings of race could lead those White English people to rapidly and subconsciously sort an Asian-looking taxi driver they encountered as among those who disrespect 'our' rules of the road (p. 452), Osman could quickly determine that a Black person trying to park a Newcastle-plated<sup>153</sup> private hire vehicle must be a first-generation immigrant belonging to one of the more recent outsider groups [e.g., Somalians, Eritreans], and judge them in much the same way. Since the encounter in question was akin to a

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of power between the interdependent groups in question, which in this case seemed less uneven between the British Asians and newer Asians than between the British Asians and the White British.

<sup>153</sup> After several years of rapid increases in licenses issued by Newcastle City Council, the material actant of the Newcastle PHV plate – green in colour – seemed to have acquired a peculiar force that comes to be enrolled in tense encounters between hackney and PHV drivers. In this sense, it was more of an identifier of drivers belonging to outsider/newcomer groups than plates from other licensing authorities in the region, e.g., dark blue Durham plates, or sky blue Sunderland plates.

‘screened’ one (Swanton, 2010a) – with Osman sitting inside a takeaway and the PHV driver on the street outside – it did not slide over into an altercation on this occasion. But the sheer intensity of the aversion – actualised in the moment of encounter – was such that it very easily could have. It brought to the fore how the mere existence or sight of PHV drivers belonging to outsider groups was experienced as an ‘irritant’ (Elias and Scotson, 1994, p. xlv).

Relatedly, several PHV participants who drove Newcastle-plated vehicles reported, and seemed perplexed by, sudden outbursts of hostility from hackney carriage drivers they had happened to come across in both Newcastle and Durham. Bar one<sup>154</sup>, all of them were first-generation immigrants. Consider, for example, the following statement by Iranian PHV driver Ahmet:

“The hackneys here [in Newcastle], *they’re not White, they’re Asians*. Pakistanis. A lot of times they’ve been aggressive, honking at us, shouting when we pick up a customer.”

– Ahmet, Newcastle PHV (Uber) driver, ride-along, 20 October 2022

Ahmet’s statement, together with what I happened to witness in Osman’s encounter, makes clear that racialisation *also* operates in figurations with distinct groups of non-white people on both sides, rather than a white group on one end and a non-white one on the other. The fuzzy, creative tendencies of race can run awry here, just as they do there. It may be useful here to make a play on a short formulation of a racialising encounter put forth by Swanton (2010a, p. 448) – ‘Car x location + flesh [brown skin] + U-turn = ‘Paki!’, ‘I hope Allah makes you impotent!’ – and say that in Osman’s case, it went something like: green-plated [Newcastle] private hire vehicle + flesh [black skin] + parking attempt = ‘Wild animals!’. The point is not to single out Black PHV drivers as the targets of such racialisation, but to underline that even in encounters between members of

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<sup>154</sup> Jack was the only Newcastle PHV participant who did not have a migrant background. He was White English, hailing from a town in South Tyneside.

non-white established and outsider groups, the materiality of bodies and the phenotype (Saldanha, 2006, p. 14) comes to be enrolled in the sorting of difference, alongside myriad other material and expressive elements like private hire vehicles; license plates; knowledge of the rising numbers of immigrants in the sector; rumours of high collision rates, drug dealing and sexual offenses; and so forth.

The presence or absence of tangible phenotypical differences [e.g., brown skin versus black skin] may modulate the extent of rage or antipathy that accompanies rapid judgements of difference, but as we saw previously, this is not always a given, since bodies can be raced based as much on skin colour as on other sorting categories like length of residence in the UK, generational background, which sector of the taxicab trade they are associated with, etc. That tensions also exist between groups of the same race or ethnicity is not by any means a new observation (e.g., Temple, 2011). The purpose of highlighting their nature in this study is to underscore the need for broadening the application of relational conceptualisations of race, as well as the scope of figurational inquiries, *beyond* the white/non-white opposition that often characterises scholarly research. At a time when ‘old-new’ distinctions (Stanley, 2017, para. 3.3) between numerous non-white groups who migrated to the UK at different points in time continue to develop – and some of the now ‘old’ groups remain afflicted by racialisation that is understood through the lens of their *own* collective memories and ‘feeling rules’ (Hochschild, 2016) – a consideration of this kind of figurational conflict cannot be set aside.

To close this chapter, let us briefly take stock of some implications relating to the questions posed at the beginning of this section. There were two parts to the argument posited by Elias. The first of these was that the mobilisation of group disgrace by the established against the outsiders essentially stems from, and is sustained by, power differentials between the two groups (Elias and Scotson, 1994, p. xxx). As he says at a later point in the same work: ‘In all these cases the newcomers are bent on improving their position and the established groups are bent on

maintaining theirs' (p. 158). Group disgrace, therefore, is at its core a weapon wielded by the established in order to consolidate their figurational positioning vis-à-vis the outsiders. It can only become effective if power differentials exist, but in some cases may also outlive a narrowing of those differentials (Stanley, 2017). This was found to be true in both variations of group disgrace examined above: without the evolving, decades-long struggle for higher status and expressive-material resources that existed between the White English and British Asians, as well as the more contemporary one between the British Asians and 'newer' Asians, it is hard to contemplate how aversion towards the outsider groups in question could have persisted in and of itself. Insofar as the findings of this study are concerned, then, it is clear that group disgrace draws its force from balance-of-power struggles between interdependent groups that together compose a figuration.

The second point made by Elias, albeit connected to the first, also stands out on its own: he implied that racial or ethnic differences have no impact on the character and force of group disgrace beyond acting as 'signals' that make outsiders 'more recognizable as such' (Elias and Scotson, 1992, pp. xlvi, xxx). It is one thing to downplay the significance of these differences in comparison to power differentials, which we have already established are the preconditions for the emergence of group disgrace, but another to suggest that their enrolment into balance-of-power struggles between the established and outsiders does not really make a difference. Here, the findings of this study depart strongly from his assertion. In both variations of group disgrace that were examined, it was evident that race – understood here as a mobile technology of differentiation (Swanton, 2010a) – did something *more* than inflecting its course along racially or ethnically segmented lines. On the contrary, it sometimes seemed to *exceed* such lines, as we saw in the case of the stigmatisation of newer Asians as those really involved in, or likely to be susceptible to, committing sexual offenses. And where racially or ethnically segmented forms of collective disgrace did exist, it was clear that the creative and inventive workings of race (Saldanha, 2006; Swanton, 2010a) could, as it did in the case of the British Asians, prolong the

time for which members of an outsider group *remain* afflicted by that collective disgrace. This inventiveness of race is key to understanding why, even after so many decades, the degrading slurs cast on second-generation British Asians in their school years continued to tar their conception of themselves, as exhibited for instance by Osman's use of the idiom 'when diamonds cut diamonds' in referring to the White English, as well as why they now encountered them in newfound forms that had acquired their own 'stickiness' (Swanton, 2010a), like the sexual innuendo tied to the grooming gangs scandal. The fallout of such racialisation was such that it also seemed to *bleed over* into a newer figuration – this time composed of Asians on both sides. Such a three-way figural constellation may be said to be indicative of an acceleration of the growing interdependence of different, formerly distant social groups in an era of increased social mobility (Elias and Scotson, 1994, p. xxxiii). At the same time, its specific character raises questions about the reproduction of what is referred to as 'whiteness', which lie outside the scope of this thesis.

Taken together, the observations above make clear that rather than being a mere inflection of group disgrace, racialisation acted as a virulent *propellant* that intensified undercurrents of aversion and contempt borne of balance-of-power struggles; enabled suspicions and resentments to accumulate as well as rearticulate through their attachment to myriad expressive and material elements (Swanton, 2010a); and gave impetus to fears of pollution, dirt and blemish on the affective plane of figural conflict (Stanley, 2017, para. 5.2). It is important to reiterate that this was found to be the case even where racial or ethnic differences did not exist. Many of these observations, and especially those pertaining to tensions between 'non-white' groups, would not have come to light without the assumption of a viewpoint that had foregrounded figural relations, irrespective of their segmentation along racial or ethnic lines. Nevertheless, it must be acceded that Elias' original model or 'empirical paradigm' (Elias and Scotson, 1994, p. xvii) on its own could not account for, and therefore failed to capture, how the workings of race as a



technology of differentiation (Swanton, 2010a) significantly modulated the character and force of group disgrace observed in this study – even if they did not determine it entirely. As the discussion in this section has attempted to demonstrate, integrating the latter viewpoint *within* a figurational lens may constitute a useful revision of Elias’ model, whose continued relevance and empirical purchase became readily apparent over the course of my fieldwork.

## **Part VI: Epilogue**

## 6. Postscript: The Casualties of Platformisation, and Those Enrolled in It

Over the preceding four chapters, we delved into some of the intricacies of two different, yet interacting, crises of self-worth faced by contemporary taxicab drivers. To close the thesis, it is helpful to review certain key insights from these chapters in terms of a simple typology: whether they relate to those who were the casualties of platformisation, as in hackney carriage drivers, or those who were directly enrolled in the economic ordering ushered in by it, as in PHV (Uber) drivers. Whereas the former painfully witnessed an erosion of qualifications that they continued to hold dear, for instance those based on costly *investments in form*, the latter routinely contended with failures of qualification, for instance in terms of the maxim of *profitability* in the market world. This thesis' examination of the travails of *both* these groups, and thus both sides of how platformisation disrupts the world of work, responds to contentions by other scholars (e.g., Bissell, 2022) that social scientific inquiries into the impact of this process have not nearly paid enough attention to those workers who were already there, but have lost out since; after all, platformisation did not transpire in a vacuum, but in an already-existing landscape.

In this context, the deep-seated alignment of hackney carriage drivers with virtues and logics from the *industrial* world is a key observation – one that resonates with a diverse body of previous work that emphasises continued attachments to the promises held out by that world (e.g., Brown, 1993; Berlant, 2011; Lamont, 2019). It also sheds light on how these hackneys, as critically competent, reflexive actors, judge a shift away from an industrial-oriented economic ordering and towards a less secure *market-connexionist* one in a way that casts this shift as a step backwards – almost as if they were well aware that ‘gig work’ is not exactly a new iteration of capitalist modes of organisation (Stanford, 2017), including within the taxicab trade (Dubal, 2017). On the other end, empirical findings on the frustrating inability of PHV (Uber) drivers to qualify themselves as *market* actors in the face of increasingly-depressed, algorithmically-determined pay and continued increases in the supply-side, and as *connexionist* actors in the face

of an unequal ratings system, erratic fluctuations in commissions and elusive, affectively disorientating job allocations, extend previous work on the experiences of Uber drivers in particular (e.g., Rosenblat and Stark, 2016; Jamil and Noiseux, 2018; Rosenblat, 2018; del Nido, 2021a) and platform work/the gig economy, algorithmic management, and late modern, 21<sup>st</sup> century capitalism more broadly (e.g., Snyder, 2016; Stark and Pais, 2020; Gregory, 2021; Newlands, 2022; Wood and Lehdonvirta, 2022). Throughout the three empirical chapters on critical operations relating to orders of worth, the pragmatic approach taken kept the focus on the ‘practical contradictions’ encountered by these actors on an everyday basis, the tests or trials [*épreuves*] that arise as a result, and the evaluations that come to pass (Barthe et al., 2013). It is the ethnographic operationalisation of this approach that led us to discern certain strategic adaptations enacted by taxicab drivers today that complicate the view taken in prior research, for instance Uber drivers’ curtailment, but not complete withdrawal, of everyday investment in the ratings system [see Chapter 5.3]. In this manner, it presents opportunities to further interrogate how Uber drivers contest their work relations in the course of different pragmatic engagements that form part of their work activity, as well as where and how contestation falls short or is impossible altogether, all against a backdrop of recurring *failures of qualification*.

The previous, final empirical chapter on figurational relations adds another, broader dimension to our understanding of the moral-pragmatic realm of the participants’ work relations, or what I called the first ‘plane’ of relationality. By bringing forth some of the repercussions of platformisation for relative/strategic self-worth, and locating them in long-term, multi-generational processes of interdependent group formation, it makes clear that the mobilisation of racialised group disgrace in today’s taxicab trade can neither be limited to a simplistic white/non-white opposition, nor be attributed to racial or ethnic prejudice in and of itself (e.g., Gebrial, 2024). Without examining the loss of self-worth – both qualified and strategic/relative – that *charges* such group disgrace, one prevents a fuller understanding of how it deviously reinvents and rearticulates itself, as well as how it might be interrupted in its tracks. At the same time,

however, the chapter also firmly argued for, and undertook, a revision to Elias' model of figural relations (Elias and Scotson, 1994), in order to account for the role played by racialisation as a virulent *propellant* of group disgrace, especially in arenas featuring members of diverse communal groups like the taxicab trade; here, it demonstrated that enrolling the geographical notion of race as a creative technology of differentiation (Swanton, 2010a) *within* a figural lens could be a valuable path forward. These prominent insights can once again be framed in terms of the typology of the casualties of platformisation and those enrolled in it. Relating mostly to the first category, they were substantiated in particular by empirical data on the figural trajectory of UK-born, second-generation British Asians in Newcastle, whose case perhaps most vividly illustrates a situation marked by two different, yet interacting, crises of self-worth. Albeit sufficient data could not be collected on corresponding experiences of members of the outsider/newcomer groups in question, many of whom were first-generation migrants directly enrolled into the process of platformisation, their predicaments as strategic actors vying for power and status call for similarly detailed investigations – whether from a figural viewpoint or otherwise.

Let us now briefly tackle the question of the *interaction* between critical operations relating to orders of worth and figural conflict, which was last alluded to in the title of the previous chapter, but as of now, lacks a conclusive resolution. This is because I reached a decision that the devising of a theoretical framework that not only encompasses, but also adequately illuminates, both 'planes' of relationality examined in this thesis required more time and thinking on my part – in simple terms, that it was not a task to be done hurriedly. Clearly, the logics of these two planes have animated me as a sociologist over the past three years, and I expect to continue thinking<sup>155</sup> about them after this PhD concludes – both as a matter of theoretical

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<sup>155</sup> At present, my view is that any theoretical framework/empirical work that endeavours to tie these 'planes' together more closely must address the pivotal question of the *stratification* of worthy qualifications in terms of different orders of worth, and do so without neutralising the notion of *equivalence*, which captures critically competent actors' attempts to *rise above* the strategic realm (Boltanski and Thévenot, 2006).

development, and in relation to empirical work, on platformisation or otherwise. Nevertheless, certain indications on the interplay between them can be gleaned from the preceding chapters. Foremost among these is something that lends support to a hypothesis put forth in the theoretical overview [Chapter 3.1] earlier – that recurring failures of qualification are likely to intensify figurational conflict, with instances of PHV (Uber) participants taking aim at ‘new’, ‘not tenured’ and ‘greedy’<sup>156</sup> Uber drivers being a case in point. Taking account of findings relating to the hackney carriage sector, we can add to this that the same results from an *erosion* of qualifications, in the sense of making them more distant. In sum, then, the more the prospect of achieving equivalence disappears, the more heated become strategic battles over power and status. A second, different indication relates to resources of *connexionist* worth that were found to be available to PHV (Uber) drivers who are first-generation migrants [see Chapter 5.3] – something that tells us a rare positive story about figurational positioning not just inhibiting, but also perhaps enabling, access to worthy qualifications for members of outsider/newcomer groups. However, this was unable to be probed further at present.

A final set of indications on the interplay between the two planes may be drawn out in terms of the common thread of *affective flows*. My earlier, empirically-grounded contention that what we deem to be ‘reflexivity’ is *also* suffused with affect, just of a different orientation, contributes to theoretical work on both pragmatic sociology and affect theory. To give a particular example, the observation that hackney carriage participants’ affective attachments to investments in their occupational form are simultaneously affirming and damaging [see Chapter 5.1] – thus leading them into a situation akin to Berlant’s (2011) notion of ‘slow death’ (p. 117) – enriches our always-partial understanding of how affective flows sediment themselves as attachments (Hennion, 2017; Anderson, 2023), take diverse, often indeterminate paths in the way they articulate (Massumi, 2002), yet always *run through* our expressive-material relations (Deleuze

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<sup>156</sup> I am repeating the terms used by PHV (Uber) participant Asim, in an extract discussed earlier in Chapter 5.2.

and Guattari, 1988). Relatedly, instances of PHV (Uber) drivers resigning themselves in the face of opaque, elusive algorithmic mechanisms that throttle worthy qualifications, as well as broader market dynamics, demonstrate how affective flows can also turn negative, in the sense of encountering impenetrable limits along their paths (Rose et al., 2021; Dekeyser et al., 2024).

The problematic of encountering limits ties into another direction for subsequent work, whether mine or that of others, that is illuminated by the findings of this study. This direction, in essence, relates to *futures* (Bazzani, 2023) in platformised occupations like the taxicab trade, and can encompass the issue of dynamics of collective action and protest, which has been the subject of recent work (e.g., Wood and Lehdonvirta, 2019; Wood et al., 2023; Umney et al., 2024). In relation to the latter, I noted previously [in Chapter 5.3] that protest demands by PHV (Uber) drivers in the North East have quite clearly asked for redressal for their failures of qualification as *both* market and connexionist actors. Besides underscoring the need to investigate protest dynamics specifically within the ‘on-location’ sector of platform work (Fernández-Macías et al., 2023), this may be taken as indicative of these workers becoming more cognisant of contradictions between Uber’s *market-connexionist* ‘moral legerdemain’ (del Nido, 2021a) and the reality of their work relations, which may translate into a greater ability to articulate these contradictions and win support from wider publics. Whether or not the latter succeeds is far from certain, but it is likely that a continued incidence of the *failures of qualification* observed in this study will keep overflowing into collective action, and more so than in the recent past. It will be important to follow how local authorities, which for many decades exercised regulatory power in terms of an *industrial-civic* compromise, respond to this, and whether or not it leads them toward actively re-envisioning their role in a new, platformised era (Rauch and Schleicher, 2015; Cohen, 2018).

To try and evoke what futures in this occupation might look like, I believe it is useful to tap into two different events that took place after this study, and most of writing up, had already

concluded. The first of these made for a powerful scene: a protest held by ‘around a hundred’ Uber drivers right next to the company’s local office by the Bigg Market in Newcastle (Gray, 2024; Aitken, 2024). After hearing about these drivers being a fragmented and dispirited group of workers, this scale of protest was heartening to see. Quite interestingly, one of the placards read ‘Low Pay, High Stress, Support Driver Mental Health’ [see Figure 25 below]. Albeit an analysis of data on health practices had to be moved away from this thesis and into a separate journal article, this reminder of the embodied and psychological toll of workers in platformised occupations should underline the importance of such work. The second event was, in contrast, disheartening: the long-term participant with whom I’d had the most engagements during my PhD fieldwork, PHV (own operator + Uber) driver David, let me know in a text message that he had had enough, and begun planning to leave the taxicab trade<sup>157</sup>. This is someone who I always thought of as a cheerful, charismatic taxicab driver – someone who seldom let the volatile terrain of his trade get to him.



**Figure 25:** Uber drivers protest in Newcastle city centre, Tuesday, 19 November, photograph by *The Chronicle* (Gray, 2024)

<sup>157</sup> Upon being asked what he might do instead, he said that he was considering getting into the taxicab rental business, since ‘there is currently a high demand for renting and buying vehicles to be used on Uber [\*sad face emoji\*]’.



Finally, to end this retelling of my ethnographic journey into the world[s] of taxicab driving, let us return to the theme that was our original point of departure: changes in the nature of work in contemporary capitalism. Here, I believe that PHV (Uber) participants' ability to devise different *compromises* (Thévenot, 2002) in terms of both the *market* and *connexionist* orders is perhaps the most noteworthy observation. Enrolled in an economic ordering where recurring failures of qualification were all but a given, they nevertheless found ways to extract a worthy qualification of themselves. Their invocation of some connexionist virtues in this context is not exactly a novel insight; flexibility, for instance, has long been one of the attractions of taxicab driving (Occhiuto, 2017). However, the assured and dynamic manner in which they made these virtues the basis of *qualified* self-worth, together with the near absence of such justifications among the industrial-aligned hackneys, may be taken as indicative of the greater presence and recognition of connexionist logics in the world they inhabit. The continuing entrenchment of this order of worth has led to the blurring of that which is 'most strongly global and the closest and most familiar', thereby creating space for new forms of exploitation (Thévenot, 2007, pp. 419-20). One might add that it has *also* led to morally complex actors deploying their 'axiological competencies' (Heinich, 2020) in creative ways, for instance – as we saw in this study – by converting the 'most familiar' [i.e., family life] into a 'global' [qualified] measure of self-worth, given that it is increasingly possible to do so in wider society. Once again, one is reminded to not dismiss the agency of social actors too hastily.

It bears reminding, however, that the compromises we saw were fragile, in the sense that they were threatened by these actors' failures of qualification in the realm of their work relations, the affective impact of which remained pronounced. On the other end, the casualties of platformisation [i.e., the hackneys] remained beholden to qualifications that, whilst eroded, continued to enact a separation between this realm and that which lay outside of it, a separation originally fortified by the industrial order of worth (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005). Just as these two cohorts of workers found their feet in the shifting sands of platformisation in different ways,

the same may be true for other cohorts of workers, in other contexts similarly unsettled by shifts in capitalist organisation. It is our task as social scientists to do justice to all their struggles.

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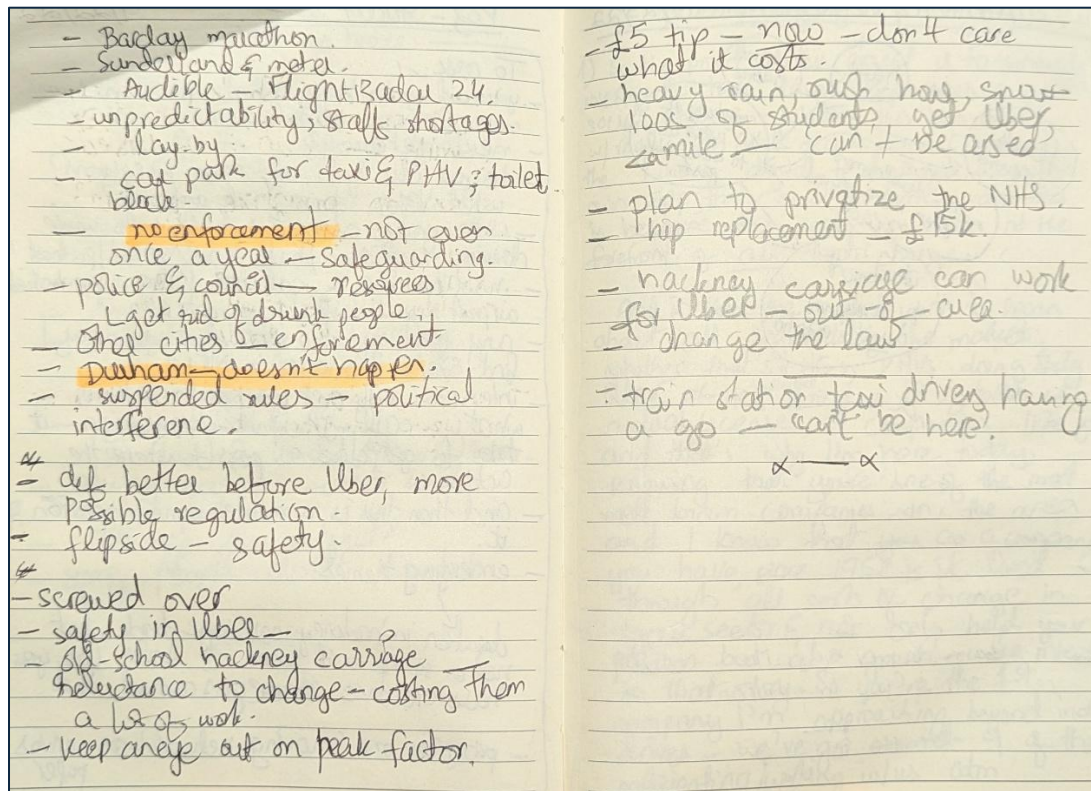
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## **Appendices**

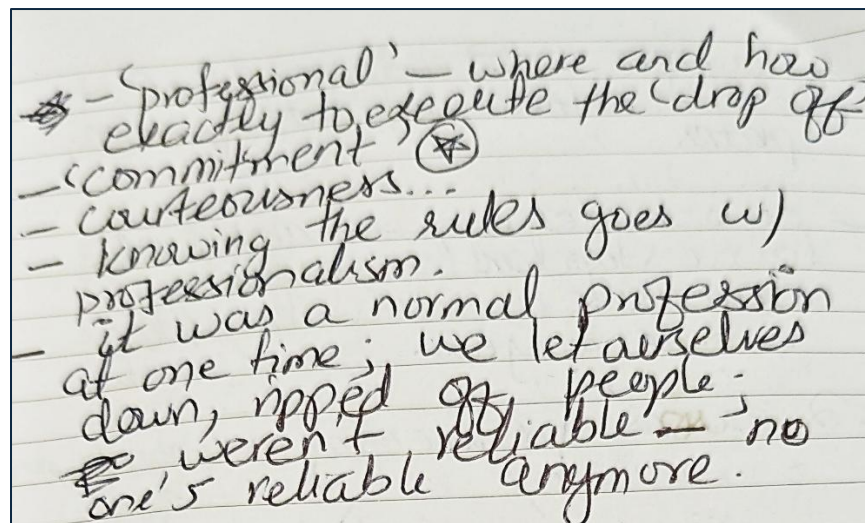


## Appendix A: Exhibits from Fieldwork Diaries



**Exhibit 1:** Notes taken during ride-along with PHV (own operator + Uber) participant David,

22 September 2022, Fieldwork Diary 1; pointers in pencil added immediately afterwards



**Exhibit 2:** Notes taken during in-person interview with hackney carriage participant Alistair, 9 February

2023, Fieldwork Diary 2

- varies, 6-7am start, in Sunderland
- 6-8, outside Sunderland.
- 305 mile trip to Great Yarmouth.
- 2 types of ppl - local, longer; sales day job w/ commission.
- £25 trip to get out of bed.
- 6/9-12, first job is always big.
- 13/29
- Born London, 31 years in Sunderland.
- 95% odds of big jobs.
- flexibility is the biggest thing.
- happy, jolly person -
- mentally prepared for no money.
- part-time since 2015.
- Covid - best thing; first lockdown
- food deliveries - £50k doing deliveries
- bakeries takeaways - brother -
- made so much money. 2-3 times
- in life, money comes to you, take it until it stops.
- imm. fam. was fine.
- licensed INVET.
- drivers - old side of it.
- takes its toll.
- not for everyone.
- circle of admission (or cycle?)
- 'in between'

**Exhibit 3:** Notes taken during ride-along with PHV (Uber) participant Asim, 12 October 2022,



- Kerala, many families from there in Sunderland.
- had problems w/ Hackney drives in Durham, not anymore, 'maybe in future Hackney will go on Uber \*laughs\*'
- great app, safety, not much money but 'it's ok'.
- full-time, drives in the day, sometimes wait times of 1.5-2 hours; e.g. 9 trips today since 7:30am.
- Uber will not go along w/ any cap as they want more drivers, for more commission, so maybe Council needs to intervene...
- eat only one meal, e.g. McDonalds/ KFC, then eat at home in the evening
- Uber sometimes organises events/dinners to meet other drivers, but most people ~~kind~~ focused on making money.
- 'kind of self-employed, but Uber is still the boss'
- play badminton for exercise.
- will continue to do Uber, as close to retirement.
- 'Uber first feed you (when I started, 4.5 years ago), then they starve you'
- know other drivers in Durham, but <sup>working</sup> don't really meet...
- customers want the technology Uber offers,

Exhibit 4: Notes taken during ride-along with PHV (Uber) participant Ajay, 3 May 2023, Fieldwork Diary 2

## Appendix B: Coding Hierarchy

| ⊕   | Name  | ▲↔ | Files | Refere |
|-----|---|----|-------|--------|
| [-] | ○ Affect                                    |    | 3     | 12     |
|     | ○ Automobilities                            |    | 3     | 4      |
|     | ○ Sociability of the job                    |    | 3     | 11     |
|     | ○ Contract work                             |    | 4     | 27     |
|     | ○ Critiques and justifications              |    | 9     | 126    |
|     | ○ Earnings                                  |    | 19    | 94     |
| [-] | ○ Established-outsider relations            |    | 16    | 117    |
|     | ○ Inferiority characterisations (unsafe, no |    | 4     | 18     |
|     | ○ Futures                                   |    | 13    | 68     |
| [-] | ○ Hackney carriage and its decline          |    | 13    | 116    |
|     | ○ Anti establishment sentiment (clean air   |    | 3     | 17     |
|     | ○ Camaraderie                               |    | 3     | 6      |
|     | ○ Clientele                                 |    | 5     | 26     |
|     | ○ Faith, patience, predestination (reliance |    | 1     | 3      |
|     | ○ Fares due to unreliable public transpor   |    | 1     | 4      |
|     | ○ Night time economy, festive seasons       |    | 3     | 41     |
|     | ○ Organising                                |    | 4     | 19     |

**Figure 26:** NVivo Coding Hierarchy, A-Ha

|  |    |     |
|--|----|-----|
| ○ Health                               | 19 | 115 |
| ○ Alcohol abuse                        | 1  | 1   |
| ○ Back pain                            | 2  | 2   |
| ○ Cardiovascular disease               | 1  | 1   |
| ○ Chronic illness                      | 1  | 1   |
| ○ Covid                                | 1  | 2   |
| ○ Diet                                 | 4  | 9   |
| ○ Exercise                             | 2  | 13  |
| + ○ Mental health                      | 6  | 11  |
| ○ Sleep                                | 1  | 6   |
| ○ Smoking                              | 1  | 1   |
| + ○ Stress                             | 4  | 8   |
| ○ Toilet facilities, kidney stones     | 2  | 5   |
| ○ Viral exposure (Covid)               | 1  | 2   |
| ○ Labour relations, working conditions | 17 | 89  |
| - ○ Life, career trajectories          | 14 | 60  |
| ○ Attachments                          | 5  | 15  |

**Figure 27:** NVivo Coding Hierarchy, He-L

|                                |    |     |
|--------------------------------|----|-----|
| ○ Migration                    | 11 | 40  |
| ○ Political agency             | 11 | 77  |
| ○ Decline of the Nort          | 3  | 11  |
| ○ Racism, misogyny, hara       | 10 | 46  |
| ○ Regulation                   | 17 | 211 |
| ○ Creation of unitary          | 2  | 2   |
| ○ Cross border hire            | 6  | 15  |
| ○ Enforcement                  | 8  | 32  |
| ○ Licensing                    | 16 | 61  |
| ○ Route tests                  | 3  | 7   |
| ○ Monopolisation               | 6  | 15  |
| ○ Relationships                | 6  | 14  |
| ○ Relationships with local     | 16 | 144 |
| ○ Austerity                    | 3  | 9   |
| ○ Safeguarding                 | 2  | 11  |
| ○ Technology                   | 3  | 42  |
| ○ Things indicative of a p     | 1  | 1   |
| ○ Traces of different polities | 8  | 43  |
| ○ Connexionist world           | 4  | 9   |
| ○ Industrial world             | 7  | 21  |
| ○ Market world                 | 6  | 13  |
| ○ Traditional PHV operato      | 2  | 27  |
| ○ Ability to set own f         | 1  | 3   |
| ○ Clientele                    | 1  | 11  |
| ○ Independence to w            | 1  | 1   |

**Figure 28:** NVivo Coding Hierarchy, M-T

|                                |    |     |
|--------------------------------|----|-----|
| ○ Uber                         | 17 | 317 |
| ○ Chance element, fl           | 9  | 19  |
| ○ Surge                        | 3  | 7   |
| ○ Clientele                    | 7  | 29  |
| ○ Commission                   | 5  | 9   |
| ○ Demand side                  | 2  | 6   |
| ○ Fare prices, dynami          | 10 | 35  |
| ○ Uber Exec                    | 2  | 5   |
| ○ Holiday pay and be           | 3  | 10  |
| ○ Positives                    | 7  | 25  |
| ○ Ratings, algorithmi          | 8  | 29  |
| ○ Scheduling                   | 10 | 21  |
| ○ Supply side (waitin          | 4  | 9   |
| ○ Work practices               | 3  | 109 |
| ○ Attunement to market rhythms |    | 14  |
| ○ Flexibility                  | 2  | 9   |
| ○ Long hours                   | 3  | 23  |
| ○ Service element              | 3  | 14  |
| ○ Strategising                 | 3  | 40  |

**Figure 29:** NVivo Coding Hierarchy, U-W



### Appendix C: Supplementary Photographs from Fieldwork



**Figure 30:** Ride-along with David to Newcastle Airport, 22 September 2022



**Figure 31:** Having a meal with Ali at the takeaway in Gateshead, 12 November 2022





**Figure 32:** Driving around Whickham, Gateshead, with Fenham, Newcastle-upon-Tyne on the horizon, ride along with Ali, 12 November 2022

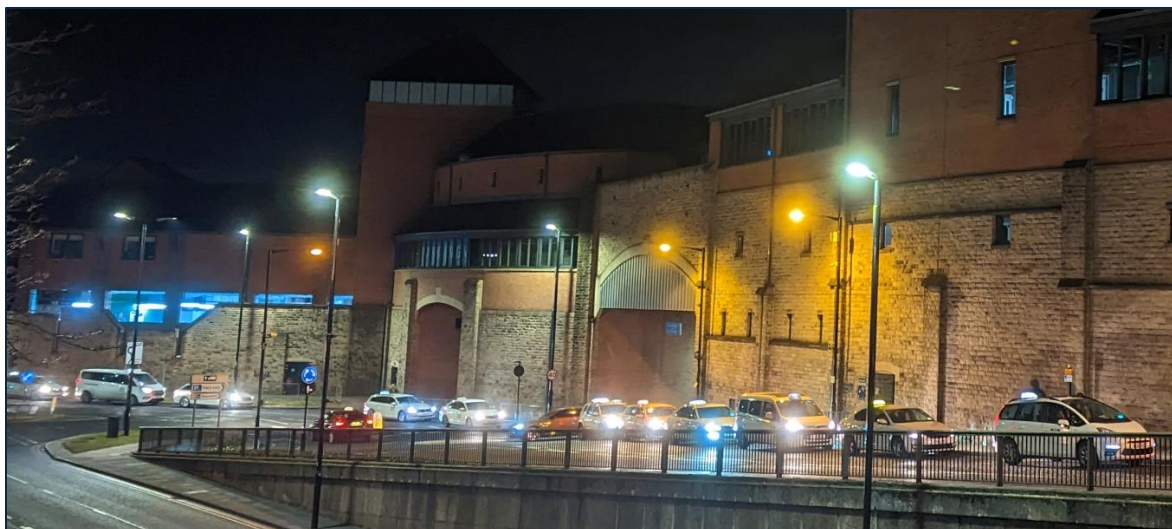


**Figure 33:** Ride-along with Alistair to Spennymoor, County Durham, 2 December 2022



**Figure 34:** Participant-observation at a taxi rank in Newcastle city centre, 7 December 2022





**Figure 35:** Taxis queued up on a Saturday night at the Prince Bishops rank in Durham, participant-observation session, 11-12 February 2023



**Figure 36:** Inside Alistair's hackney carriage, participant-observation session, 11-12 February 2023



**Figure 37:** David gets pinged after using Uber's 'set destination' feature, ride-along, 22 September 2022





**Figure 38:** Someone gets into a PHV vehicle (left) outside Central Station, Newcastle, while a hackney carriage (right) waits at the rank adjacent, 23 February 2023

## Appendix D: Participant Information Sheet [Revised]



### Participant Information Sheet

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**Project title:** In the Face of Change: An Ethnographic Study of Platformisation in the North East England Cab Driving Trade

**Researcher:** [Salman Khan](#)

**Department:** Department of Sociology

**Contact details:** [gkmt16@durham.ac.uk](mailto:gkmt16@durham.ac.uk)

**Date:** 27/09/2022 (revised)

You are invited to take part in a study conducted as part of my PhD research at Durham University. The study is funded by Durham University Faculty of Social Sciences and Health's Durham Doctoral Studentship (DDS) scheme.

This study has received ethical approval from Durham University Department of Sociology's Ethics Committee.

Before you decide whether to agree to take part it is important for you to understand the purpose of the research and what is involved as a participant. Please read the following information carefully. Please get in contact with me if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information.

The rights and responsibilities of anyone taking part in Durham University research are set out in our [Participants Charter](#).

### What is the purpose of the study?

The overarching aim of this study is to thoroughly examine taxicab drivers' experiences of *economic, technological and regulatory change* in their trade over the past 15 years, and how

they perceive and experience these changes in the course of their everyday lives. Within this broad inquiry, there will be a particular focus on the *rise of digital platforms* such as Uber, and how this has affected the working conditions of drivers in *both* the hackney carriage and PHV sectors. The study seeks to separately interrogate the ‘work relations’ of these two sectors in the first instance: for example, hackney carriage drivers may be asked about how aspects of their trade (e.g., footfall, competition) have been affected by the onset of digital platforms in recent years, and how they evaluate regulatory changes tied to this shift, whilst PHV drivers may be asked about their everyday experiences of interacting with the Uber app – in relation to pay, job allocations, commissions, ratings, etc. – and their evaluations of these experiences.

Further to this focus on how drivers perceive, experience and evaluate the rise of digital platforms [or the ‘**platformisation**’ of their trade], the study will also inquire into another topic: the *everyday life management of health*. On this topic, it is specifically interested in: your understanding of health risks connected to the job; the strategies employed on an everyday basis for managing these health risks; and whether and how they can be linked to the everyday routines, work practices and mobility patterns of being a cab driver.

Throughout the course of the study, the researcher will incrementally conduct a mapping of different relationships – economic, technological, legal, particular times and spaces, etc. – that mediate the everyday practices of cab driving. The impact of the rise of digital platforms, as well as health risks, will be located *within* this network. With continual feedback from the participants themselves, it is hoped that potential points of intervention for betterment of working condition and health can be identified by the end of the study, which will then be shared with local stakeholders in the form of research outputs, in the collective interest of the cab driving sector (see ‘potential benefits’ below).

The fieldwork component of the study is expected to run from August 2022 to July 2023.

**[remainder of participant information sheet can be found in Appendix E]**

## Interview Guide

---

Please read the following interview guide for an indication of the topics that may be asked about during in-person/phone interviews and participant-observation sessions. As all

interviews will be semi-structured, the exact form taken by questions may vary. All questions may also lead to follow-up questions, in line with your responses to them. In general, it is expected that questions posed during our sessions will evolve as fieldwork progresses – based on, for instance, salient themes found to be emphasised by multiple participants.

This guide has been divided into seven sections, some of which may not be applicable to you: (A) *working as a taxicab driver*; (B) *the past, present & future of cab driving*; (C) *everyday work practices*; (D) *the hackney carriage trade*; (E) *driving for Uber and other platforms*; (F) *driving for local private hire operators*; and (G) *health at work*.

### **A) Working as a Cab Driver**

1. How long have you worked as taxicab driver?
2. How did you find yourself joining this occupation?
3. Do you own, rent or lease your cab?
4. Are you a Hackney Carriage driver or a Private Hire Vehicle (PHV) driver?
5. Have you always been a Hackney Carriage/PHV driver, or also have experience with the other regulatory category? If you have worked in both sectors, how do you compare them?
6. What, in your view, are the main benefits of being a taxicab driver? And what are its main drawbacks?

### **B) The Past, Present & Future of Cab Driving**

1. What do you think are the most important issues affecting those working in the cab driving sector today?
2. How would you describe the state of the trade compared to when you first joined?
3. How do you see the future of the trade?
4. How do you see your own future, as someone who drives a cab for a living?

### **C) Everyday Work Practices**

1. How many hours do you typically drive your cab in a day? What does your weekly schedule look like, and how does it vary?
2. How do you manage work-life balance in this job?
3. Are there any places where you regularly go when you are on a break, for instance for having lunch or dinner?
4. What other places (e.g., garages, dispatch centres) do you visit periodically?



5. Do you meet other cab drivers? Where and how often do you tend to meet them?
6. Are there any specific areas where you tend to find fares (e.g., customers coming to a taxi rank, pings on Uber app), or otherwise tend to drive in?
7. On average, what distance do you cover every day whilst driving your cab? Does this vary by time of the week, periods like school or university term times, major events, etc.?
8. How do you feel about 'being on the move' far more than most other lines of work? Do you enjoy it? Are there some parts of it you do not like?
9. How would you describe your relationship with your cab itself, provided that this is a space where you spend a lot of your time?
10. What technologies (e.g., apps, taximeters, SatNav) do you use daily in your work?
11. How do these technologies benefit you, in your view? And are there any ways in which they make work less rewarding/more stressful?
12. How do you approach your interactions with each individual fare/customer/rider? Do you enjoy interacting with them? What considerations determine whether or not you would interact with them?

#### **D) The Hackney Carriage Trade**

1. How do you compare driving a hackney carriage to other forms of taxicab driving?
2. In what ways has the hackney carriage trade been affected by the rise of platforms like Uber?
3. How, in your view, did Uber attain the position it holds in the taxicab trade today?
4. How do you view the regulatory changes that have taken place in the trade over the past 15 years, and since the arrival of Uber in particular?
5. Have you been part of any collective action/organizing efforts? If so, how was your experience? And what needs to change to make it more effective?

#### **E) Driving for Uber and Other Platforms**

1. How do you compare Uber driving with other forms of taxicab driving?
2. How do you see your relationship with the Uber algorithm, particularly in relation to (i) pay; (ii) job allocations; (iii) commissions; and (iv) the ratings system?
3. Where would you place yourself on the spectrum between being completely self-employed, and Uber being akin to your boss?
4. In what ways do you like the everyday experience of working on the Uber app, and in what ways do you dislike it?

5. Have you been part of any collective action/organizing efforts? If so, how was your experience? And what needs to change to make it more effective?

**F) Driving for Local PHV Operators**

1. How do you compare driving for a local operator with other forms of taxicab driving, and Uber driving in particular?
2. Do you visit your cab company office on a regular basis? How is your relationship with the management and staff there?

**G) Health at Work**

1. Do you think cab driving allows you to manage your health in a satisfactory way? Are there any ways in which it prevents this?
  2. What do you think are the main health risks faced by cab drivers?
  3. How do you manage these risks on an everyday basis?
  4. What are the ways in which you try to keep healthy (e.g., exercising, diet)?
  5. How do you perceive the risk of exposure to infectious disease that comes with driving a cab?
  6. Do you have any comorbidities (e.g., hypertension, cardiovascular illness) that you have to manage/live with on an everyday basis?
  7. If so, how do you manage this comorbidity as a cab driver?
  8. Even before the Covid pandemic, studies had characterised cab drivers as 'at risk', for example in terms of uncertain income flows as well as higher rates of assault. What do you think of suggestions that cab driving is, in terms of health, a 'risky' occupation?
-

## Appendix E: Participant Information Sheet [Initial]



### Participant Information Sheet

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**Project title:** In a Double Pincer: An Ethnographic Study of Health Practices in the Taxicab Driving Occupation

**Researcher:** [Salman Khan](#)

**Department:** Department of Sociology

**Contact details:** [gkmt16@durham.ac.uk](mailto:gkmt16@durham.ac.uk)

**Date:** 05/08/2022

You are invited to take part in a study conducted as part of my PhD research at Durham University. The study is funded by Durham University Faculty of Social Sciences and Health's Durham Doctoral Studentship (DDS) scheme.

This study has received ethical approval from Durham University Department of Sociology's Ethics Committee.

Before you decide whether to agree to take part it is important for you to understand the purpose of the research and what is involved as a participant. Please read the following information carefully. Please get in contact with me if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information.

The rights and responsibilities of anyone taking part in Durham University research are set out in our [Participants Charter](#).

### What is the purpose of the study?

The overarching aim of this study is to thoroughly examine the everyday life practices of cab drivers in the North East (*both* hackney carriage and PHV drivers), and to connect these to

the *everyday life management of health* – for instance in relation to the risk of microbial/infectious disease (e.g., Covid, flu) and the management of chronic disease (e.g., diabetes) whilst on the job. In particular, the study is particularly interested in: your perceptions of health risks connected to the job; different characterisations of cab drivers as ‘at risk’ (most recently during the Covid pandemic); the strategies employed on an everyday basis for managing such risks; the information sources and support networks drawn upon; and how all of these aspects can be linked to the everyday routines, work practices and mobility patterns of being a cab driver.

Throughout the course of the study, the researcher will incrementally conduct a mapping of different relationships – economic, technological, legal, particular times and spaces, etc. – that mediate the everyday practices of cab driving. Health risks will thereafter be located *within* this network. With continual feedback from the participants themselves, it is hoped that several potential points of intervention will be identified by the end of the study, which will then be shared with local authorities (e.g., Newcastle City Council) and other relevant policy making institutions in the collective interest of the cab driving sector (see ‘potential benefits’ below).

The fieldwork component of the study is expected to run from August 2022 to July 2023.

## **Why have I been invited to take part?**

You have been invited to participate in the research as you currently work as a cab driver in North East England, are a representative of a licensing authority or of an organisation representing drivers working in the cab driving industry [hackney carriage or PHV], work in management at a cab company/operator, or have previous experience of working in the trade and have now retired.

## **Do I have to take part?**

Your participation is voluntary, and you do not have to agree to take part. If you do agree to take part, you can withdraw from the study without giving a reason up to the point of completion of data analysis (anticipated to be by September of 2023). Your rights in relation to withdrawing any personal data that is identifiable to you are explained in the accompanying Privacy Notice.

## **What will happen to me if I take part?**

If you agree to take part in the study, you will be asked to participate in a series of participant-observation sessions, involving audio-recorded interviews as well as any photographic material (pertaining to different spaces & routes only). For representatives of organisations or managers at cab companies/operators, as well as any participants outside the North East, participation will take the form of a one-time interview, conducted either in-person, online, or over the phone.

These sessions will take place at times when you are not engaged in work (i.e., do not have a fare, have finished your shift, are on a break, or are waiting for a fare). The length of each session will vary in accordance with your schedule and the time you have available, so the research will not interfere with your work; an estimated duration for each session is half an hour. During the interviews you can omit any questions you do not wish to answer. You may also suspend or stop the interview at any time, and it is up to you whether you would like to proceed to follow-up interviews/participant-observation sessions.

All participant-observation sessions will take place in person, at a place where it is convenient for you to meet. This may include the cab itself (either parked or moving, if you want to talk whilst traveling somewhere on your own); local coffee shops; taxi ranks; cab company offices; restaurants/takeaways where you tend to have lunch or dinner; designated waiting areas, etc. In each instance, the researcher will travel to where you are to conduct the session, and will be available to meet in the day as well as night. Apart from the aforementioned venues, an alternative venue that is of mutual convenience to you and the researcher can also be agreed. In short, both the time that each session takes and the venue where it is held will remain flexible, in order to not cause any undue inconvenience for you and/or your work.

## **Are there any potential risks involved? And are there any potential benefits?**

### Identifying your contribution to the research

There will be limited instances in which direct quotes may be used in the dissertation/thesis write-up, as well as in any subsequent journal article publications and conference presentations; journal articles and conference presentations are expected to focus on specific aspects (e.g., Uber drivers' everyday interactions with the Uber app) rather than on the entirety of the research.

In the event that any of these outputs are read by any of your colleagues and/or friends and family,

it is possible that your contribution to the research may be recognised.

To mitigate this risk, the researcher will follow set protocols for which will involve the following: both the field notes taken during participant-observation as well as the final transcript of the interview will be pseudonymised (removal of your name and replaced with a pseudonym, with the pseudonym key kept securely by the researcher on SharePoint) and confidentialised (removal of any other information that can identify you, such as your previous place of employment), with only information relating to the occupational context being retained. This contextualising data will be needed to assist in the reporting of the findings of the research; for example, information about your career trajectory as a cab driver and/or your level of experience.

#### Privileged information

To avoid compromise of privileged information and so preventing a potential conflict of interest, the researcher will not ask about information that is normally deemed confidential, for instance exact particulars about your medical history. In the event that any such information is shared by you (inadvertently or otherwise) in the midst of an interview, the researcher will alert you that you have a right to have this information withdrawn from the field notes being taken.

#### Potential benefits

The potential benefits of this research pertain in the first instance to facilitating a more thorough understanding of the cab driving sector and the people who work in it, especially at the present moment in time. Furthermore, it seeks to bring forth a situated understanding of why people working in this occupation face particular health risks. The research idea started by taking note of the poor health outcomes faced by the sector during the Covid pandemic, and this study aims to 'take a step back' to examine the wider context in which this vulnerability exists.

Based on the everyday life practices of cab drivers themselves, it is intended in part to address insufficient institutional attention to the difficulties faced by this vital sector, some of which were highlighted by the event of the pandemic. Through a detailed sociological investigation of work practices (see 'purpose of this study' above), it will locate how and where health vulnerabilities arise, and hopes to identify potential sites of intervention that can be raised with the relevant authorities after the project concludes.

### **Will my personal data be kept confidential?**

See the accompanying Privacy Notice.

## **What will happen to the results of the project?**

The findings from the project will form part of my PhD dissertation/thesis write-up, which will be submitted internally to Durham University Department of Sociology towards the end of 2024. A summary of the research findings for participants in the research will be produced and shared with you.

Your data will be kept in pseudonymised form for 2 years after the end of the study. You may at any point request that your data be deleted. If you request this before the end of the study, data associated with you can also be removed from the dissertation/thesis.

Both before and after the submission of the doctoral thesis, pseudonymised and confidentialised data may be used in research outputs (such as, scholarly journal articles, conference papers, research briefings given internally within Durham University, etc.).

For further details as to how your personal data will be used, see the Privacy notice.

## **Who owns the copyright of the interview transcript?**

For data collected via interviews that are recorded and/or transcribed, Durham University holds the copyright of recordings and transcripts, but each speaker is an author of his or her recorded words in the interview.

With your consent, your copyright as author will be transferred to Durham University. Transfer of the copyright facilitates the researcher to quote from the interviews in research outputs (including the doctoral thesis, journal articles, conference papers, research briefings).

## **Who do I contact if I have any questions or concerns about this study?**

If you have any further questions or concerns about this study, please speak to the researcher (Salman Khan – [gkmt16@durham.ac.uk](mailto:gkmt16@durham.ac.uk)) or project supervisor (Professor Tiago Moreira – [tiago.moreira@durham.ac.uk](mailto:tiago.moreira@durham.ac.uk)).

If you remain unhappy or wish to make a formal complaint, please submit a complaint via the University's [Complaints Process](#).

Thank you for reading this information and considering taking part in this study.

## Interview Guide

---

Please read the following interview guide for an indication of the topics that may be asked about during in-person/phone interviews and participant-observation sessions. As all interviews will be semi-structured, the exact form taken by questions may vary. All questions may also lead to follow-up questions, in line with your responses to them. In general, it is expected that questions posed during our sessions will evolve as fieldwork progresses – based on, for instance, salient themes found to be emphasised by multiple participants.

The guide has been divided into five sections: (A) *working as a cab driver*; (B) *the past, present & future of cab driving*; (C) *everyday work practices*; (D) *health at work*; & (E) *characterisations of cab drivers as 'at risk'*.

### **A) Working as a Cab Driver**

1. How long have you worked as taxicab driver?
2. How did you find yourself joining this occupation?
3. Do you own, rent or lease your cab?
4. Are you a Hackney Carriage driver or a Private Hire Vehicle (PHV) driver?
5. Have you always been a Hackney Carriage/PHV driver, or also have experience with the other regulatory category? If you have worked in both sectors, how do you compare them?
6. What, in your view, are the main benefits of being a taxicab driver? And what are its main drawbacks?

### **B) The Past, Present & Future of Cab Driving**

1. What do you think are the most important issues affecting those working in the cab driving sector today?
2. How would you describe the state of the trade compared to when you first joined?
3. How do you see the future of the trade?
4. How do you see your own future, as someone who drives a cab for a living?

### **C) Everyday Work Practices**

1. How many hours do you typically drive your cab in a day? What does your weekly schedule look like, and how does it vary?



2. How do you manage work-life balance in this job?
3. Are there any places where you regularly go when you are on a break, for instance for having lunch or dinner?
4. What other places (e.g., garages, dispatch centres) do you visit periodically?
5. Do you meet other cab drivers? Where and how often do you tend to meet them?
6. Are there any specific areas where you tend to find fares (e.g., customers coming to a taxi rank, pings on Uber app), or otherwise tend to drive in?
7. On average, what distance do you cover every day whilst driving your cab? Does this vary by time of the week, periods like school or university term times, major events, etc.?
8. How do you feel about 'being on the move' far more than most other lines of work? Do you enjoy it? Are there some parts of it you do not like?
9. How would you describe your relationship with your cab itself, provided that this is a space where you spend a lot of your time?
10. What technologies (e.g., apps, taximeters, SatNav) do you use daily in your work?
11. How do these technologies benefit you, in your view? And are there any ways in which they make work less rewarding/more stressful?
12. How do you approach your interactions with each individual fare/customer/rider? Do you enjoy interacting with them? What considerations determine whether or not you would interact with them?

#### **D) Health at Work**

1. Do you think cab driving allows you to manage your health in a satisfactory way? Are there any ways in which it prevents this?
2. What do you think are the main health risks faced by cab drivers?
3. How do you manage these risks on an everyday basis?
4. What are the ways in which you try to keep healthy (e.g., exercising, diet)?
5. How do you perceive the risk of exposure to infectious disease that comes with driving a cab?
6. Do you have any comorbidities (e.g., hypertension, cardiovascular illness) that you have to manage/live with on an everyday basis?
7. If so, how do you manage this comorbidity as a cab driver?
8. What sources of support do you have when it comes to your health, including but not limited to fellow drivers, your cab company, any union you are a member of, colleagues, family and friends, etc.?

**E) Characterisations of Cab Drivers as 'At Risk'**

1. Even before the Covid pandemic, studies had characterised cab drivers as 'at risk', for example in terms of uncertain income flows as well as higher rates of assault. What do you think of suggestions that cab driving is, in terms of health, a 'risky' occupation?
  2. During the Covid pandemic, did you hear of any media reports and/or any other information that cab drivers (both hackneys & PHVs) were facing a lot of illness and death from the virus, and that they were also being infected at a greater rate?
  3. What do you make of data which showed that cab drivers died at a greater rate than other 'at risk', 'frontline' occupations, like nurses, doctors and care workers? Why do you think this may have been the case?
  4. Do you think that the causes attributed by media reports, which focused on greater occupational risk one end and race/ethnicity on the other, were accurately reflective of cab drivers' experiences with Covid?
  5. Would you agree with SAGE, media reports and academic papers which say that cab drivers are an 'at risk' population when it comes to Covid?
  6. What practices (e.g., mask wearing, putting a plastic/glass shield in your cab, opening the windows) did you employ for managing the everyday risk of airborne Covid transmission? Have you continued with any of these practices?
  7. Do you think the factors that predispose you to greater Covid risk also hold for other health risks?
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## Appendix E: Consent Form



### In the Face of Change: An Ethnographic Study of Platformisation in the North East England Taxicab Trade

#### Research Project Consent Form for Participant-Observation & Interview Participants

Before your involvement in the research commences, please confirm that you give your informed consent to taking part. Make sure that you fully understand what participating in the research will involve, so please familiarise yourself with the accompanying information sheet, and don't hesitate to ask me if you have any questions about the project. If everything sounds good to you, then please complete the form below.

|   | Yes | No |
|---|-----|----|
| I have read the information sheet and been given the opportunity to ask questions about the research project, with satisfactory responses.  |     |    |
| I understand that I have the right not to participate in any of the activities if I don't want to, and that I can stop or take a break at any time.   |     |    |
| I give my permission for the interviews to be audio recorded and then transcribed into a written document.  |     |    |
| I understand that all data from the project will be stored securely, and that any identifiable information about myself in field notes, interview transcript, research documents and future outputs (publications, presentations) will be anonymised. |     |    |
| I am aware that my personal details <sup>158</sup> will be kept confidential.   |     |    |
| I understand that whilst my identity will be anonymised, it cannot be guaranteed that my comments in the interviews will not be identifiable to others who know me.   |     |    |
| I understand that my participation in the project may be used in publications and presentations arising from the research (e.g., anonymised quotations in books, journal articles, and conference presentations).                                     |     |    |
| I understand that I am free to choose whether to take part in this research, and can withdraw my data from it at any time within 6 months after taking part.  |     |    |
| I understand that I can keep a copy of this consent form for my records.  |     |    |

I confirm that I understand what is required of me for this research project, and that I consent to taking part.

Signed:

Date:

**Researcher:** Salman Khan ([gkmt16@durham.ac.uk](mailto:gkmt16@durham.ac.uk))

**Supervisor:** Tiago Moreira ([tiago.moreira@durham.ac.uk](mailto:tiago.moreira@durham.ac.uk))

Please note that this copy of the consent form (kept with the university) will be deleted 12 months after your participation in the research.

<sup>158</sup> One participant requested that their licensing authority and online profile(s) be specifically mentioned here; they were provided with an amended form accordingly.